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G. David Nordley

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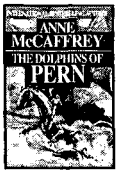

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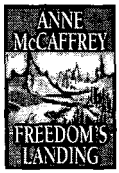

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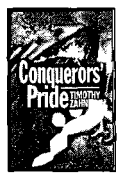

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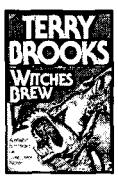

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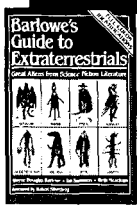

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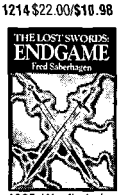

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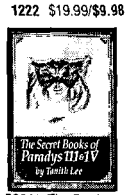

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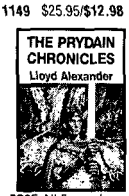

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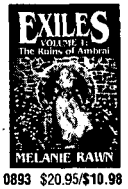

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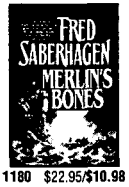

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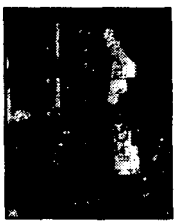

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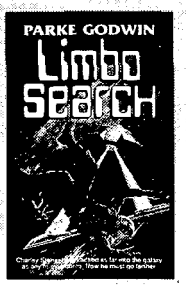

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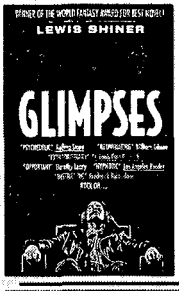

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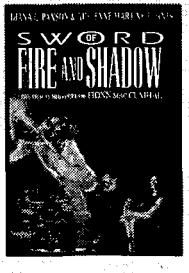

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE MILLENNIUM IS ALMOST HERE

Nelson Mandela is President of South Africa. Yasir Arafat, with the blessing of Israel, is running a legitimate P.L.O. government in Jericho, and further Arab-Israel rapprochement is under diplomatic discussion. The Soviet Union is history, and so is the loathsome little dictatorship that was East Germany. The former Marxist-Leninist states of Eastern Europe have opened stock exchanges and mutual funds. Fidel Castro's regime is tottering; South Korea is drawing up plans for the absorption of North Korea as soon as the Kim regime finishes collapsing there; the Irish Republican Army has proclaimed peace in Northern Ireland. In South and Central America, rational new economic policies are ending decades of crazy inflation in half a dozen countries. Only such misery spots as Bosnia, Haiti, and Rwanda remain in anguish to remind us of the human race's potential for making trouble for itself.

What's going on? Why are all these lions suddenly lying down with the lambs? The sudden outbreak of harmonious relations all around the world in the mid-1990s would almost make us think that the Millennium is at hand.

And, as a matter of fact, it is: the literal one, that is, the beginning of a new cycle of a thousand years. That one is due to arrive in another six years, or maybe five, depending on when you choose to believe that the twenty-first century starts. But there's also a metaphorical meaning for "millennium"—the dawning of an apocalyptic new epoch of transformation and rebirth. And what is happening, apparently, is that *that* Millennium as well as the calendrical one is on its way toward us. What we are seeing, I think, is the birth of the new world order of the twenty-first century—the world we used to read about in the science fiction of fifty years ago. In the era of global interconnectedness that now is opening, economic rationalism will be a powerful force for peace. The various ideology-driven nations are discovering that it's bad business to let themselves be controlled by political configurations that are rooted in abstraction. While they maintain the destructive purity of their ideologies, other and more pragmatic countries are running off with all the profits. And profit, everyone is suddenly discovering, is the root of prosperity.

All this is happening because

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revolutions in transportation and especially communication have brought about a true global economy. Orbiting satellites provide cheap and efficient voice and fax service to all countries. Computers are ubiquitous and they are quickly being linked in a worldwide net. Air transport is safer and swifter than we ever dreamed possible. Tariff boundaries have given way to multi-national trading pacts. English has emerged as a world language, the universal communications tool. Major currencies are freely convertible, and so are a good many minor ones. Everyone is connected instantaneously to everyone else; those who opt out of the system for reasons of some stubborn ideological conviction simply get ignored while the fun goes on all around them.

As Lawrence H. Summers, U.S. Undersecretary of the Treasury for International Economics, recently put it, "It used to be that capital did not move much across international borders. [But now] global markets reward good economic performance and punish bad economic performance more quickly than ever. Twenty years ago the Arabs and Israelis could have made peace and their hopes of getting international investment would have been slim. Today, six months of good stabilization policies in Russia and you see real foreign money moving in."

With investment comes economic growth; with growth comes jobs; with jobs comes food on the table,

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modern highways, reliable electrical service, proper medical care. To struggle onward under the burden of antiquated political or economic notions these days is to give yourself a self-administered prosperity bypass, and the lesson is sinking in everywhere. What seems to be coming into being as the calendrical millennium approaches, in short, is something like the glittering unitary Earth we used to read about in the science fiction of fifty and sixty years ago.

I don't mean that we have a World Government with a World President presiding over a Council of Scientists, as so many of those old penny-a-word stories blithely proposed, or that we do business —yet—in "credits" or "munits" instead of dollars and francs and pounds and marks and lire, or that we think of ourselves as citizens of "Earth" rather than of one national or sub-national unit or another. Far from it. The United Nations, which at least some people thought would evolve into the World Government of the old *Astounding Science Fiction* days, has devolved into a largely futile debating body; the Council of Scientists, thank God, remains a pulp-magazine fantasy; attempts at introducing a unified currency simply for Europe have gone nowhere so far; and so on and so forth.

Even so, a *de facto* one-world economic system has somehow come into being in the past ten or fifteen years, just as a *de facto* global computer network, unplanned and (so far) unregulated, has somehow given birth to itself more recently. The advent of these systems—permitting the free movement of capital around the world—has put the kibosh on much of the ideological nonsense that scarred the century now ending with apocalyptic paroxysms of conflict.

Primarily, the cruel hoax of socialism, a system notable for built-in counterincentives to effective work, is withering up and blowing away all over the planet. Communism, socialism's most extreme form, collapsed almost overnight when the Soviet Union's hundreds of millions of citizens, furious at being forced to live in poverty for ideological reasons while the new global trading system was bringing sweet materialistic comfort to places like Singapore and Malaysia and South Korea, abruptly withdrew their consent to be governed by non-elected masters. With the end of the Soviet Union came an end, too, to the mischievous support that the Soviets had been providing, for ideological reasons, to troublemaking entities in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. The disappearance of Soviet subsidization meant a sudden need for the leaders of those countries to develop rational economic systems —or face the wrath of a starving populace in an increasingly prosperous world.

So in the end, just as Karl Marx knew and feared, money *is* doing the talking—and economic deter-

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minism is bringing peace. Boycotts and sanctions, both official and unofficial, have served to exclude the hornet's-nest nations from the worldwide festival of progress that has been going on for more than a decade. And—at last—the peoples of those nations are pondering the real consequences of their various intransigences.

Why are we continuing to squabble, the Arabs and Israelis are asking themselves and each other, while the tourist dollars go to more tranquil parts of the world? Why do we continue to fear the communist beliefs of the African National Congress even at the cost of committing economic suicide, the South African whites wonder, if communism no longer exists? And in Ireland they ask: Has all this fury between Catholics and Protestants put any meat and potatoes on anyone's table? What positive purpose is our endless feud serving, after all?

More such questions will be asked—and rational answers will be forthcoming. The nations that are breeding themselves into poverty and outright famine will begin to wonder about the merits of having huge families. The nations that have surrendered their political destinies to medieval-minded theocrats, who involve them in terrorist attacks on their neighbors that bring ugly retaliations, will want to know why their particular god needs to impose so much hardship and suffering upon them for the sake of the virtuous life. And so on.

Where the old ideological baggage has been discarded, new wealth is starting to flow. Hotels are being built in places like Belfast, Beirut, and the Republic of South Africa, previously off the itineraries of tourists and businessmen. Factories are reopening in countries where constant strife caused destructive shortages of capital. Half a dozen economies in former trouble-spots vividly demonstrate how much can be lost by deliberately isolating yourself from the ever more integrated worldwide economy, and new outbreaks of peace are reported constantly.

I don't mean to imply that sweet harmony and the reign of reason will be the universal rule in the century now opening before us. We have the fratricidal madness in the former Yugoslavia and the genocidal lunacies in Rwanda to remind us that some human passions transcend even economic determinism. But the trends are hopeful in many quarters.

Those new hotels and factories may not be solutions in and of themselves—but they will contribute toward the general welfare of their countries; people will be better fed, healthier, happier. Is that not the ultimate goal of the political state? So I would like to think; but the sorry century now ebbing away has been dominated by those who believed that the promotion of some particular -ism takes higher priority.

The best epitaph for the twentieth century that I have heard so

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far comes from eighty-two-year-old Lev Kopelev, who spent years in the Soviet gulag as a political dissenter and now lives in Germany. Recently he said, referring to one of the young leaders of the new Russia, "He just wants Russia to live a normal life, which in the modern world means an open, free-market, capitalistic society. We had too many ideologies in the twentieth century. The twenty-first should be governed by common sense." ●

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While robot mothers tend them at their play.
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We stare at the stars we can never know.

We curse the bread, we curse the dough,
We curse the God that made us from such hapless clay.
No man can go where the deepships go:
We stare at the stars we can never know.

—David Lunde

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According to G. David Nordley, "terraforming Venus is one of the most difficult problems imaginable—and so is dreaming up problems that can't be solved by that same technology. The most interesting dilemmas will be human issues, not questions that can be solved by robots." In the author's latest tale, one man finds that technology's wonderful promise of a new beginning includes the terrifying challenge to remake himself on . . .

DAWN VENUS

G. David Nordley

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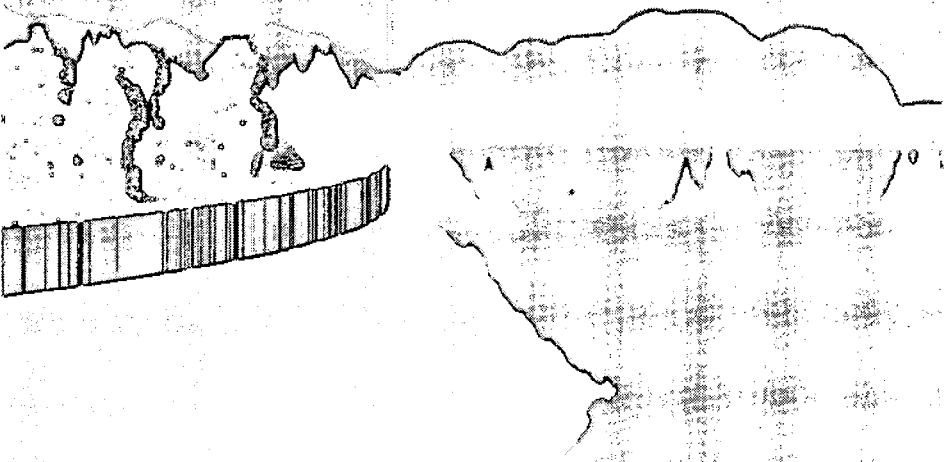

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The road to Venus apparently led through people, Bik Wu thought as he struggled sideways against the crush of the crowd and vertically against the crush of gravity while strange odors, colorful costumes, and not-quite-lost languages assaulted his other senses. People. Kai was gone now—another man was her widower. But for Bik there had been no one else.

This must be the Earth immigrants lounge, he realized; the soft chairs promised to Mercury immigrants were nowhere to be seen. Nor was there any help; personal comm circuits were saturated. His bones ached with over twice his usual weight. Once on the elevator, he told himself, there would be a soft, form-fitting, reclining chair for the three-hundred-kilometer ride down to the surface. Until then, he just had to endure.

The Venus maglev interplanet port was swamped with late arrivals. Some media types were saying that the opening of the Devana Archipelago south of Beta Regio was the largest new land rush in the history of the human race. Judged by the average standards of big project management, Bik figured that it was probably a textbook success. But from his worm's eye viewpoint in the middle of this mob, it looked like a fiasco. Nevertheless, after six decades of living in domes with permafrost below and vacuum above, Bik was going to find some elbow room down there.

Maybe enough to show the custody board that he cared enough to have Junior.

Gravity or no, he was a bigger and stronger man than average, so he bulled his way, with apologies left and right, to the elevator booking counter and slapped his palm on the reader.

"Mercury, Idaho?" The transport receptionist smiled when her local cybe displayed his ID. A big woman with a trace of east Asian heritage in her face, or her smile, she was full of a cheerfulness that didn't match his mood. Where were the robots when you *wanted* one? But around here it seemed that any job that could be done by a human was being done by a human. Service was in style. He shook his head. So, apparently, were madhouses.

"No, no," he groaned. "That's a Mercury *eye dee* number. Mercury the planet. Chao Meng-Fu Dome."

She raised an eyebrow. "You're in the wrong lounge."

"I've figured that out," he said with forced evenness, "but this is where they sent me. I'd like a reservation to the surface, surface transportation to Port Tannhauser and a room when I get there."

Only eighteen hundred kilometers to go! Port Venus was on the Circumplanetary Maglev Railroad, a planet-girding ring of frictionless magnetic levitation railways held above the atmosphere by a dozen trains of mass circulating at greater than orbital velocity. Built to remove the ancient carbon dioxide atmosphere and increase the spin of the planet,

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the CMR was one of the wonders of the solar system—but it was also a transportation bottleneck.

The receptionist stared at the screen, looked at seating charts, and grinned. "I'm surprised you're still standing. In fact, I'm surprised to see *any* immigrants from Mercury. Worked out a bit?"

"Yes." He shrugged, not wanting to admit his misery. "Some. I would have had more time on the regular transport, but I got pulled back for some unnecessary work at New Loki. I got a friend to get me on the express, so here I am. Their centrifuge time was limited, but I'm in reasonable shape."

Reasonable? He was maybe ten kilos over his theoretical optimum, and it showed more here than on Mercury. Four days in a centrifuge hadn't done much more than retrain his reflexes from Mercury's gravity. On the plus side, he told himself, his strength was okay, his bone mass was fine and thirty laps a day in the dome pool gave him an underlying endurance on which he could draw. "I can do this."

The receptionist shook her head, her long jet-black hair lending a semblance of femininity to a well-muscled, almost masculine, figure. Bik wondered if she might be a swimmer or maybe a climber.

"Grab," she said, "that there's going to be a lot of standing around. There are only so many elevators, we have to be fair, and there are—" She got the distant look that people get when they link with the cybersystem for some detail they don't have immediately. Born with a radio interface gene mod, probably. He shuddered—what if she ever *wanted* to be out of touch? "—uh, twelve thousand six hundred and fifty-seven would-be homesteaders in port as we speak."

Bik rolled his eyes up.

She grinned. "Including sixteen from the planet Mercury! So you're not the only one."

"Fine," Bik sighed. "Now, when can I get on an elevator car down?"

Once down he would have to catch an air shuttle fifteen hundred kilometers northeast to Port Tannhauser, where the land rush was being staged. Once there, he could reserve a parcel. Then all he would have to do was to get there within twenty-four hours, universal time—by the local dawn of Venus's leisurely day. The planet, of course, was spinning like a top compared to what it used to be—once about every fifty days, retrograde, making for thirty days from sun to sun when you included its orbital motion. Before the CMR, it had taken 243 days for Venus to turn under the stars.

Bik kept going through new world things in his mind; so much history, so much background, so many different ways of doing things, so many hoops to jump through, so little time to jump. The way things were going, every boat and aircraft for a thousand kilometers around would be taken

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by the time he arrived. Then he'd have to try to pick something within walking distance, which, for his already-aching Mercurian feet, wasn't very far.

Thousands of kilometers. Chao Meng-Fu was hardly 150 kilometers across, and *it* looked huge.

"The elevators are pretty crowded," the attendant reminded him. "It should ease up in a couple of hours."

"Land parcel registration is first-come, first-serve. I just want to have a fair chance." He sighed. "I did everything I was supposed to do. Isn't there any faster way down?"

She pursed her lips and grinned mischievously. "Do you like to walk the edge? Take risks?"

"Citizen, I spent half a decade supervising the Chao Meng-Fu construction job, outside. Something goes wrong outside on Mercury's south pole and you can freeze your feet and boil your head. Simultaneously." Bik grinned. He exaggerated a little, but he thought it would impress her.

Impress her? His therapist might consider that progress, Bik thought. It had been a while since he cared about what any woman except Kai had thought of him.

The receptionist smiled. Damn if she hadn't gotten his mind off his aching feet. "The name's Suwon and *you* can take a flying leap."

Another tease, of course. When would he learn? "Sorry, I didn't mean to bother you."

She laughed at his devastated expression. "No, I meant literally. Grab this; a personal evac unit from this far up has enough cross range, in theory, to get you to Port Tannhauser if you jump down line a ways. They have recreational versions, and I've used them a couple of times with a boyfriend from further down the line. The cybes don't like it, but screw them. It's my life. I'll show you the ropes—if you've got the nerves."

He shook his head. He'd been had; he couldn't read people and had misread her playfulness for something more serious. She'd worked the boyfriend in smoothly, too—a nice warn off.

A neat woman, he had to admit, and she probably meant to help, but jumping off a three-hundred-kilometer high railroad wasn't in his plans. "That's a last resort. Let's try to get me on the tube first."

She nodded and looked off in space for a moment again. "I can get you on the ten-hundred with an earlier standby on the oh-three, standing room only."

His bones, muscles, ligaments, and cartilage screamed at him, but he grimaced and said, "I'll take it. Look, if there's any way you can move me up, it's important. "

She looked a question at him.

His first thought was that his problems were none of her business, but

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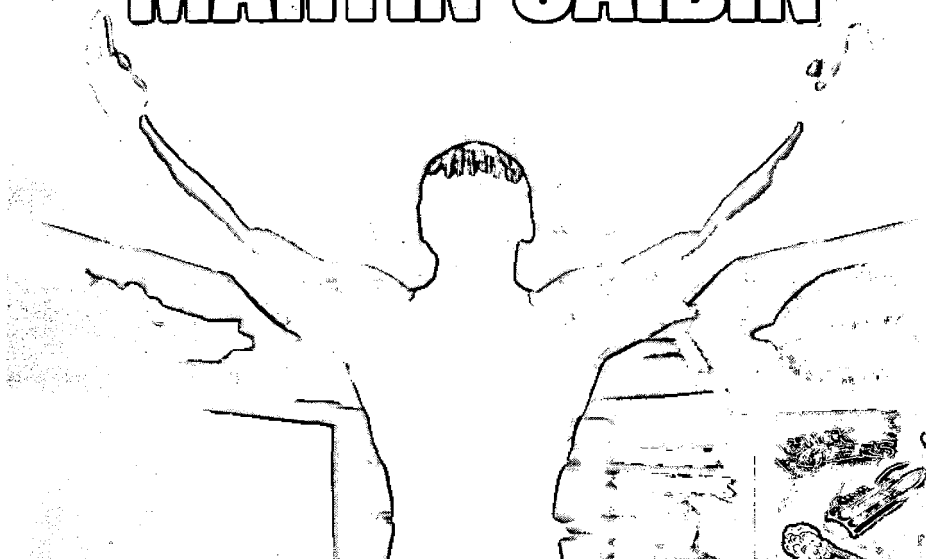

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his aching body had put him in need of some sympathy, so he decided to chance telling her.

"It's about my kid. His mother just died, and I'm in a custody fight with her second husband. If I can get a small island, or a cut of a large one, that'll help me in my custody case. I've got a board to impress and I think they'll think this would be a good place to raise a kid, understand?"

The grin faded and she pursed her lips. "I'll do what I can. Meanwhile, I've cleared your prints for the lounge for low-gravity-world immigrants. They have plenty of recliners. Down the corridor to your left, door RS-3."

He might get to like the woman, he decided, as he waved a goodbye and headed for relief.

The waiting list for the oh-three hundred elevator turned out to have more names on it than the elevator cab had seats. He checked registration statistics. There were some ten thousand people down at Port Tannhauser already and only about fifteen thousand parcels, distributed among the several hundred islands. Pickings were getting thin.

The place was beautiful. The archipelago just south of the city was a drowned mountain range less than a century old. Its shorelines still expanded with every wave striking higher or lower as the gentle solar tide completed its monthly cycle. Its vids sparkled with dark green sensuous surf-flecked beaches and shiny green palms punctuated with bright birds and flowers.

Kai would have loved it, if she'd only stuck with him long enough to see it, Bik thought. See, Kai, I *do* have some romance in my soul.

Staring at the brightly colored wall above the other low-gee couch sitters, Bik's memory went back to their wedding under the stars at Mercury's south pole. Then fast-forward to the birth of their son, to weekend visits during the months of separation on the New Loki project, to when Kai told him she'd fallen in love with a starship officer from Ceres named Thor Wendt, was going off with him and was taking Bikki with her.

What had he done wrong? What could he have done differently? As always there were no answers.

Hurt as he had been, he'd never stopped loving Kai—she had just been too beautiful, too bright and vivacious for him to keep up with. He still thought himself fortunate to have had those few years with her. He had to admit he'd been a practical, safe, duty-bound drag on her free spirit.

She'd told Bik that she and Thor wanted Bikki to bond with his new father, and so didn't want any real time interaction between Bik and the kid for now. Bik had joint custody, and could have tried to enjoin her from doing that, or sued, for custody himself. But Mercurian courts generally

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favored two-parent families in such cases. The lawyer he consulted said it would have been a waste of time.

He sent presents and letters out to the belt for birthdays and New Year's and got receipts, but lightspeed delays made two-way contact difficult, and having to talk to Kai in the process made it even more so. There had never been any acknowledgement. Once he'd gotten a fax of a crayon Father's Day card from the school, but that had been all in five years. He didn't hold it against Junior; kids his age didn't understand that kind of thing. Anyway, his work on New Loki's three-million-person dome at the Mercurian north pole had made the years go by quickly.

Bik remembered the call. It came from Ceres a year ago. Some suicidal Nihilists had wanted to make a statement about robotics, technology, and what they felt was the general meaningless direction of civilization. That was fine with Bik as long as they wrote their propaganda in their own blood; but their tactics had gotten twisted somehow into rationalizing general mayhem—and Kai had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

A quiet, sincere gentleman had called to tell him that Thor and "Ted Wendt" had survived a bomb at Ceres Starport, but his ex-wife had not. Until then he had hoped that, somehow, Wendt would go and they would be together again. Hope died with Kai.

Bik had hesitated in filing for custody. Thor Wendt considered the boy his own now; he had raised Junior for five of the boy's eight years, and felt that Kalinda station in the Kruger 60 system would be a safer place for him. But finally Bik had called legal services. Junior was his flesh and blood, and a living memory of Kai and those few glorious years that he'd shared with her.

It turned out that Thor was well connected in the shady cash world, and had gotten an effective advocate. What it was now down to was that Thor's starship would leave in three months, and Bik's government-supplied lawyer had been blunt. Wendt was vulnerable, but just what did Bik have to offer a child beyond a genetic relationship? A sterile apartment and day care while Bik was away being a superfluous supervisor of construction robots smarter than he was?

A tone brought him out of his musings; the oh-three-hundred elevator had departed without taking any standbys. A glance at the overhead showed him the oh-four-hundred didn't look much better. Standby hopefuls were to check in with the attendants.

The original receptionist had said a personal evac unit might reach Port Tannhauser directly from up here. Not making any internal commitment just yet, Bik decided to investigate how a person would get one. Did people really do that for sport? He pulled out his intellicard and asked it to get central data.

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Bik pursed his lips and stared at the single glass eye in the wall behind the sport jumping concession counter. "Lessons?" He hadn't anticipated that kind of delay.

"The sport units are made for manual operation; that's the sport of it!" the cyberservant answered in clear standard English as its Waldos handed Bik a heavy bag of gear. "But it is highly advisable that you go through a virtual simulation and pass the evaluation."

"Highly advisable?"

"You won't be allowed outside the airlock otherwise, I'm afraid. Now let's go over the equipment inventory. Aerobrake sled?"

Bik opened the duffelbag and shook his head, "I don't—"

"It's the heavy transparent pouch," a new, but somehow familiar, voice informed him. He spun around and saw the elevator attendant. Out of uniform and in a skin-tight vacuum suit with bright diagonal slashes, she looked—not beautiful, he decided, but, well, formidable. "You strap it on your front side and inflate it on the way down. You steer by shifting your body. When you get subsonic, you can pop the tross wing—that's for albatross—and glide forever."

"Uh, thanks. . . ."

She laughed. "Suwon. From the elevator. Look, I said I'd do what I could. I figured I'd find you here; you looked like a guy on a mission. Let's go through the rest of this stuff."

It took them the better part of an hour. In addition to the tross wing for long-range gliding, there was an emergency parasail that weighed less than a hundred grams, fluorescent dyes and beacon, a harness that could really chafe if you didn't put it on just right, and various techniques for putting everything on and then getting at all of it.

Then there was the simulator, a virtual reality shell with a harness suspended inside. Despite Suwon talking him through it, he burnt up the first time down, stalled to subsonic way too early the second time, and didn't get the range the third time. On the fourth run he had a survivable burn-through and hit it more or less right on his fifth run.

It was oh eight hundred, and he had to register by sixteen hundred.

"Well, thanks," he told her. "I'm going to give it a try."

"You're going to kill yourself—if not by burning up, by dropping in the ocean so far from anywhere that you'll drown before anything can get to you."

She didn't understand.

"Suwon, I want you to understand, uh, 'grab onto' this. There's a great big hole inside me where there used to be a wife and a son. If there's a chance to get some of that back, I'll take it. And if not, well, a simple clean death would be a welcome end to all of this."

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"Crap. I'm coming with you."

"Huh?" Bik stared at her. Why was she trying to become part of his life? Painful memories extinguished a flicker of biological excitement; the last thing he wanted now was another woman in his life. But he couldn't just tell her to get lost, not after all the help she'd given him and not when time was running out. "This is my problem," he said, finally. "I just met you; why should you care?"

She stared back at him and pursed her lips again, as if she were determined not to let another word out until she'd thought it carefully through. "A fair question. You're on a mission, doing something other than just trying to amuse yourself. That's the most excitement I've run across in years. I guess I find that attractive. There's something else. Venus Surface Commission workers aren't eligible for the land rush. The way around that is to team up with someone who is—easier said than done."

"Team up?"

"Eligible partners can transfer a portion of their share to others after fifty years, or enter a joint tenancy arrangement. . . ."

Bik held up his hand. "Okay. Thirty percent of the land if you get me there."

Suwon smiled and shook her head. "Fifty."

Damn, she was easy to look at, once you got used to muscles on a woman. Especially when she smiled. Bik finally nodded to her; he was low on options. "Okay, 50 percent." Bik wasn't a haggler—he'd let Kai have all his Chao property just to avoid fighting her for it. "Let's go, then. What about your boyfriend?"

"He got careless on a jump about a month ago. Burned in. Five hundred and twenty years old and he burned in on a jump." Suwon shrugged her shoulders, but it was clear that she had been hurt.

Maybe she did understand. Bik thought about sympathy, rebound logic, unknown backgrounds, and all the rest of the dangerous stuff and cast it aside mentally. This acquaintance, relationship, whatever it became, would be a calculated risk, one that he was walking into with his eyes open.

"Sorry to hear that." He put his hand on hers, and found it was a muscular, callused, well-used hand that went with the rest of its owner's body. He gave it a firm squeeze and let go.

She gave him a lopsided smile. Clearly, Suwon's approach to a setback was to challenge her fears and throw herself right back at it, immediately, passionately. Without another word, she checked out a personal evacuation unit and inspected it. Then they were ready.

They emerged from the elevator terminal onto a maintenance balcony

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with a waffle grid floor and a severe functional guardrail. The view stunned Bik. The CMR was a fairyland forest of open trusses made of gray composite beams that somehow became shiny as they seemed to merge into a single ribbon toward the distant horizon. Occasionally a car on one of the upper tracks would silently flash by, pressed upward to the overhead rails by the centrifugal force from its higher-than-orbital velocity. Every so often a track would lift out like a stray fiber in a paintbrush, straightening to a zero gravity trajectory and ending abruptly to wait for an outbound maglev spacecraft.

There were still enough traces of atmosphere here to make the noses of the escaping cars glow as they left these tracks on trajectories leading to the rest of the solar system.

The wide gray band of the CMR railbed dwarfed the elevator tower that helped tether it to the planet. The tower quickly shrank to a barely discernible thread under their perch that connected to a small island that was just barely visible in a vast blue-black sea. There was a trace of a blue-green land mass on the edge of their northern horizon, and a scattering of islands, but these were minor details of a vast cloud-flecked ocean, that, through some trick of perspective, seemed like a concave bowl.

"Chao looks like that, from the dome top, except the water/land ratio is reversed. The dome top's only fifty kilometers up, but you can't tell the scale."

"Surprised you didn't get a piece of that."

"I did. I let her have it, hoping that maybe she'd change her mind. I let her have everything."

"Too proud to fight, huh?" Suwon turned her gold-plated helmet face toward him, and he saw himself against the rising filtered sun, in miniature.

"Something like that." The sun had just risen below them and would take two weeks to reach local noon. Pride? Bik smiled; once Venus had taken the better part of a year to turn on its axis, but a millennium of launching out carbon dioxide frozen from the atmosphere, and volcanic sediment scraped from the low basaltic plains, and two centuries of bringing water in had given it a rotational period of about an Earth month. Human beings and their machines had done that, and Bik couldn't help feeling a little pride. The crust was still adjusting through an abundance of volcanoes and quakes that would be part of Venusian life for something like ten million years, according to most projections. Below, they built for it.

The sun was tiny by Bik's Mercurian standards, and seemed to sparkle inside a broad, off-center ring of diffuse light. This, he realized, was the twenty-four-million-meter sunshield. His engineering imagination saw

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the vast structure balance gravity with constantly adjusted photon pressure the Lagrange point between Venus and the sun. A sun-sieve now, it let half the light get through to Venus and converted the other half to energy for starship ports and antimatter factories. His eyes saw a ghostly, sparkling disk, visibly larger and nearer than the sun, with edges that caught and reflected light in a grazing incidence that created the effect of the bright ring.

"Finished sightseeing?" Suwon asked, gently.

"I can see why you like living up here."

She laughed. "You should see a gigaton water freighter match cradle vee on the landing track; that's the dark band in the middle. It lets you grab just how astro this operation is. Magnificent! Nothing due in today, though. Let's check the equipment one more time."

Bik did, then checked Suwon's gear as she checked his.

"Ready. Now, Bik," she continued in a low, stagily seductive voice, "do you ever have fantasies of sacrificing yourself? Being a human bomb for some cause? Letting a lover kill you? Falling on your sword? Taking Joan of Arc's place at the stake?"

Bik couldn't see her eyes, but he imagined that they glowed. Yes, of course he had, but he couldn't bring himself to say so; it wasn't the sort of thing one shared in Mercurian society. On an airless planet, suicides sometimes took others with them, and even to fantasize about it where people could hear got a lot more attention than one wanted. Bik shivered.

"Can't admit it, can you? Well, they're normal. Everyone has them, and some day, when I've had enough of this immortal body that our genetic engineers have given me, I think I'm going to do this dive without any equipment. Oh, maybe a pressure suit so I can experience a little more of it—the burning part for instance—but nothing else. I'll just run out and throw myself off and let nature take its course. End my life as a shooting star!"

She straddled the rail, reached and grabbed his hand and laughed demonically. "Like I said, we all have these fantasies . . . and the time to indulge them is now! Come on!"

Almost in a trance, he swung one leg over the rail and then the other and stood on his toes hanging onto the rail, three hundred kilometers above the sea.

Suwon's chest rose and fell with each excited breath. "Now," she shouted, "push off and *die!*" Then she did it, with a bloodcurdling yell, falling rapidly away below him.

Bik craned his neck to see her, and in doing so started to slip. What the hell? Go, something inside said, *do it!* He pushed hard and was in free fall; the CMR dwindled to a dark ribbon far above him, the Devana Sea waited below. Soon he seemed to stop moving; there was nothing

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still near enough by which to judge his falling. Suwon's manic laughter filled his helmet. Finally she stopped.

"One hundred fifty kilometers, buddy. Time to get serious."

Below him, a crystalline lady slipper bloomed, tumbling and glinting in the sun. Bik remembered the sled cord and found it. There *was* a temptation not to pull it, to delay a little, to enjoy zero gravity and flirt with that ecstasy of self destruction. He was beginning to get warm.

"Pull the red ring, Bik!" Suwon shouted. He jerked it open automatically, and quickly found himself surrounded by a huge, triangular, transparent pillow. It pressed against him gently in the tenuous slipstream, turning and righting itself so that he lay prone. It began to vibrate slightly as the pressure gradually began to increase, and he could hear a low, eerie moan.

"I'm over here," Suwon called. "Shift your weight left."

He leaned left, and the transparent lifting body began a long, steady curve in that direction. "I'm going to wiggle a little," Suwon said. "Do you see me?"

Bik scanned ahead, right and left, and saw nothing.

"You're below me a bit, but right behind me now. Shift your weight right a bit, then steady."

He did it. "Okay."

"Now look up."

Far, far ahead of him in the vast black distance above the thin glowing band of atmosphere, he caught a sparkle. He stared at it for several seconds, then began to pick out the transparent envelope and the tiny white figure inside. The front of the envelope had began to glow.

"I found you."

"Good. Now we're going to have to do things together as much as possible. We're building up a fair amount of northward velocity, but we need more, so I'm going to dive a bit. Follow me by shifting your weight forward, but be ready to shift back when I do. We don't want to get too hot."

"Okay."

She started to pull ahead, and he pulled himself forward on the handholds. He shot forward, passing her underneath. In a near panic, he pushed himself back again.

"Whoa. Hold it right there. I'll catch up," she said, and scooted smoothly back into view above and in front of him. "Now edge forward just a bit. There. Hold that."

He was back at full weight again and there was a definite, diffuse glow in front of him.

"Your boyfriend. Are you sure it was an accident?"

Silence.

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He waited.

Finally she answered, in measured tones. "No. But I think so; I mean there was no note to grab or anything. That's a pretty drastic way of breaking up and I don't think I'm that scary. But you can never be sure with people. Let's change the subject, huh?"

It really wasn't any of his business. "This must be spectacular at night," he finally remarked.

"Yeah. When I go, it'll be at night. I'll become a comet, a Valkyrie pyre in the sky. It'll burn the guilt right out of me."

"You sound like you're looking forward to it."

"I am . . . " She laughed ". . . in a thousand years or so. The anticipation will keep me going. Right now, we're down to thirty kilometers and it's time to back off a bit. Edge back just a little, bring your nose up. We've got another thousand klicks to go. Okay. Now a little more. Okay."

"Optimum glide path?" he asked. He knew she was linked to the terminal computer and had everything calculated to the nth degree, but he wanted the reassurance. The ocean was very big and blue below him.

"Feels right, " she responded. "I think we hit it pretty good."

"What's the range projection?" he inquired.

"Range projection?" She laughed. "We just go as far as we can. Never tried to make Beta Regio from the elevator head before."

He began to have a sinking feeling. "What do the cybes say?"

"Cybes? Grab this, Bik. We're out of contact—on our own. These radios are only good for a few kilometers unless we're talking to a big directional antenna. Frequency management. This is strictly by feel from here on; that's the fun of it. Besides, the last few hundred kilometers all depend on air currents, and that's weather. No telling. Hold on there, you're shifting your weight. Shift forward again, just a little and catch up. You really have to watch body position."

Bik got Suwon in sight again and kept her there. Silently. Any fantasies about casting himself into oblivion were long ago and far away. Now, he was very, very scared. And excited—he understood why people did this—to challenge real danger, with their own muscles, reflexes, and brains, without relying on some cybernetic safety net. It would be a great feeling, if you survived. And maybe, even, in the last moments, if you didn't.

"Bik, do you know an asshole by the name of Deccar Brunt?"

A chill colder than anything his suit could fix went through Bik. "Too well. He's a lawyer working for the space jock that took Kai—my ex. Brunt is hellishly well connected and thinks that I'm some kind of monster. He's determined to keep Junior away from me. How'd you run into him?"

"He came asking questions after I put you in the computer for an

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elevator cab reservation. I'd say he didn't want you to get down to the surface—thought I was working too hard on your behalf. You say you had problems getting on the transport here in the first place?"

Of course, Bik thought. "Yes. What did he offer?"

"He hinted that he could do things for me if I didn't help you. Not clearly enough for me to hand him to the cybes, but clearly enough. Look, is there money involved in this?" Her voice showed she shared his contempt for the stuff, Bik thought. With robot factories all through the solar system, manufactured things were either free or not allowed. Scarce necessities, such as habitable land or electromagnetic frequencies, were allocated fairly by need or lot. Money, he felt, was a game for people who wanted things they'd be better off without, but for which they were willing to trade.

"Kai liked having the stuff. She'd trade, uh, favors, for it. It was a game to her—but I think that's how she met Thor." It was appropriate, in a way—as legend went, the underground "economy" had started within months of the official elimination of money when some enterprising prostitute had started issuing promissory notes. Since money proved impossible to repress and didn't threaten anyone's welfare, the governments, cybes, and Bik generally ignored it. When he could.

Bik's sled started to vibrate and hum with ever-increasing loudness, matching his mood. Why, Kai? "Why?"

"Going transsonic. Just stay centered and ride through; you're inherently stable. Bik, you put up with all that?" She meant Kai's adventures, he realized—smiling at the metaphorical coincidence.

"I didn't own her, I was away a lot, and up until she left, things were fine, uh, more than fine."

"Sounds like a good actress. So she had money, and your rights in that dome on Mercury, and Bikki. Now this Thor has it all and wants to keep it all. Some big male thing with him, I bet. But how the hell can he threaten me?"

Bik felt miserable. "He's got an ethics problem, I think. Smart, competent, used to having his own way. Big stud, except he's never been given a repro permit. As for threats, all it takes is having someone on a board or having some authority that wants something money can buy. Maybe one of your bosses."

"Crap." The bitterness in Suwon's voice was understandable; real jobs were scarce and hers was in jeopardy. "Well, I didn't listen to it. Just made me want to help you. Hey, grab on, we're subsonic, down to thirty kilometers, beginning to lose lift. Time to pop the wings. Orange ring, on three. Ready?"

"Ready."

"One . . . two . . . Now."

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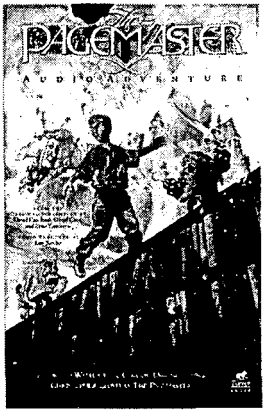

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He pulled and his translucent white wings, astoundingly long and thin, rolled out of his backpack to the sides and a long, stiff tube with a triangular duct canard shot out in front of him, bent alarmingly, and began to vibrate like a bassoon reed.

"What—" He was really shaking. The sims hadn't been like this.

"Bistable polymorphon. Sometimes takes a second to lock into its deployed shape. Don't worry, you look good."

As if at Suwon's command, the loud hum quickly softened to a gentle whoosh as he accelerated upward with breathtaking force. He remembered to shift forward to lower his angle of attack before he lost too much air speed, and saw the canard structure bend down slightly as he did it; its smart materials almost anticipated what he wanted to do. When he got himself straightened out, he searched for Suwon.

"I'm pretty far ahead and above you," she called out, as if reading his mind. "Deflate your lifting body now. It will remember its folds and repack itself. That will cut your drag."

"How?" he asked.

"Green ring on your chest; Venturi suction tube. Keep pulling until it's in."

He did so, and felt his airspeed increase as the transparent envelope collapsed into a stiff aerodynamic sled. When he caught up to Suwon, she did the same and made an S-turn to take station off his right wing.

"We're a couple of kilometers lower than I'd like to be for the range we need, but with some luck on the air currents, we'll make it. Just now, you need to practice gliding. We're heading for the shadow line."

By fifteen hundred, they'd passed into night. Earth and its L1 sunshield lit the sky like a close pair of distant arc lights, glinting off waves that were getting entirely too close. But they had reached the archipelago; here and there a single light or campfire showed where people had already spread to the islands.

Suwon caught an updraft on the windward side of a ghostly volcanic island and slipped off to the east to avoid the trailing downdraft. The couple of kilometers they gained helped them almost reach the next island, but that was all. It was a long, faint green wall on the horizon, with what looked to be a geodesic dome glowing from inside lights on the east end.

"We're going in," Suwon said. "Reinflate your entry sled."

"Huh?"

"Now. It'll float. Your wings are buoyant, too, and will help keep you upright. Watch me." She shot ahead of him in a shallow dive, squandering her remaining energy.

"I flare—" She seemed to hang in the air over the dark sparkling waves

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like some ghostly albatross. "—inflate and drop in. Now you do it. Use the red ring."

He'd gotten used to following her instructions and did it, but it was easier watched than done. Bik stalled before he got the sled inflated again, dropped through the waves and popped up again with water spilling from the top of the sled. It was embarrassing, but since he was still in his vacuum suit, he didn't get wet. The water was quite warm.

"You all right?" Suwon called. Her voice seemed tinny and distant, and it took him a couple of seconds to realize that he was hearing her acoustically, instead of on radio. He looked around and found her helmet flashing about thirty meters to his left; their wingtip beacons were almost touching.

He opened his faceplate and took a deep breath of sea air. Childhood memories. He'd been five when his father had taken him on a walk by the sea near their home in Victoria, B.C., and told him that, sometimes, people can't live together any more, and that he would be going away. Did Bik know the way home? Bik had nodded yes. His father had nodded gravely, turned, and walked away. Forever.

"Bik?"

"All right physically. Feeling a little silly and disappointed. I suppose it was worth the shot. Great fun, anyway. Haven't smelled the sea since I was a kid."

"You've still got a couple of hours to register."

"But we've got to be a couple of hundred kilometers short of Port Tannhauser."

"There's a homesite on this island in front of us."

"The dome?"

"You grabbed it. That's Mabel Beautaux's place; Mabel and I go way back."

"I thought this wasn't open to settlement yet."

"It's an old terraforming station; she's been squatting since oxygen hit 15 percent. She probably got to be first in line to register it when they opened up."

"Does she have transportation?"

"Float plane—she'll be out to pick us up in a bit."

"Huh?"

Suwon pointed to her head and smiled. "My brain is part radio, remember? We're in range."

"You knew all along; you were just letting me suffer!"

Suwon laughed and Bik reached down to try to splash her, but he almost fell out of his makeshift raft and found himself teetering on his stomach, getting his face wet with every wave. The situation was so

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ridiculous that when he finally wriggled himself back to safety, he had to laugh, too.

They were both laughing when the graceful W-shaped aircraft settled into the waves beside them.

Mabel Beautaux turned out to be a tiny, almost elfin, woman with a discernible African heritage and soft birdlike voice. She seemed to have stopped growing in her early teens, but her archaic name made Bik think she might go back to the early days of the terraforming project.

He was not, however, quite prepared for how *far* back she went. As they tied the lines of the aircraft to a simple wooden dock, he asked when she was born.

"In 1993. I was 135 when the geriatric retrovirus came along; there are only a couple of dozen others that are older. Most of my life, I've been a farmer; in Alabama the first century or so, Peary dome on Luna after I got my treatment and degree, then I came here and helped manage the bioforming project, from right after they let the sun back through, 'bout two hundred years ago.

"What a ride that was! Storms and quakes! Populations of this, that, and the other critter breeding out of control! I worked on fertility retroviruses, and we had a devil of a time playing God, I tell you." She grinned and shrugged her shoulders. "Now everything's so settled down they can start giving the land away to whoever comes along. But that's why we did it, isn't it? So there!" She hitched the plane's nose line to a dock cleat. "You're dealing with a living fossil in her third millennium!"

"A very beautiful one," Bik gushed, clumsy with awe.

"Oh? Well, now, gravity is good for the bones, and I do a fair amount of physical work around here." She waved a hand at a tidy wood building next to the geodesic dome station building and a clear field surrounded by palms and eucalyptus. There were three—cows. Not obviously penned, just standing there munching grass. One of them looked at him suspiciously just as Mabel asked "Got any idea of where you two want to settle?"

"We're not . . . " Bik stammered. Would a cow charge, like in a bullfight? Was there something he should do, or shouldn't? He wasn't wearing red. "I mean we just met today. Business arrangement."

"Oh? Well, let's see what's available for you to claim. I'll slice some chicken squash, and if you'll grab a few of those tomatoes, Suwon, we can have some sandwiches while we figure it out. We can wash that down with some of my peach wine and then I'll fly you over to Port Tannhauser to register."

Suwon gave Mabel a hug and went to work. Bik, who'd never seen a meal prepared, let alone by human hands, stood around helpless and

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fascinated. After a feast that somehow tasted better than any home appliance or restaurant had ever given him, Mabel's computer started to print the latest claim maps. With the maps, however, came a news item that gave Mabel a hard frown.

"You didn't tell me they fired you, Suwon."

"What!" Suwon was clearly shocked.

"Says here that the settlement board is taking under advisement the status of people who get transportation outside normal channels and those who aid them. Mentions you in particular, Bik—and cites you for showing unprofessional favoritism, Suwon."

"But that's nonsense," Suwon protested. "And anyone with guts enough can dive from the CMR! Nothing wrong with that. What do the cybes say?"

Mabel held up her hand for a moment and concentrated. "They say no settlement rules were broken, but fairness issues are a human judgment call." Her brow wrinkled. "By the time they get a committee to debate that, it will be too late even if you win! I'd say someone clever is out to get you, Bik. But why you, Suwon?"

"I was warned." Suwon shook her head, more angry than afraid. "By a lawyer working for someone trying to keep Bik from getting his kid back. *He* tried to bribe *me!* Mabel, this is outrageous."

Mabel was muttering under her breath.

No, Bik realized, she was subvocalizing to another built-in radio link.

She smiled at Bik's stare. "This old body's been through so many updates, what was one more? When Suwon showed me her radio a few years back, well, I had to have one, too. Comes in handy when your hands are busy milking cows!" She didn't quite giggle, but she was clearly amused by her joke. "Now, I've been around a while and I know a few people too. I've got them injuncted by the cybes from doing anything worse until after the rush. Anything legal, that is. Let's look at the map. You get three choices. Let's see what you want."

The intelliprint was linked and the colors on the map of the archipelago changed as they watched, white areas growing pink as they filled with tiny red rectangles. The red signified a claimed parcel.

"Everything near Port Tannhauser has been grabbed," Suwon observed.

"Then we'd best get over there." Mabel raised an eyebrow. "But first, let's look at this area."

She put her finger on the east end of the archipelago and the map expanded in scale to reveal a dozen tiny islands, all white. "Here's where we are now." Mabel's island was the first offshore peak of the range running south from Port Tannhauser, separated from the mainland of Beta Regio by a narrow strait. She moved her finger west toward Asteria

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Regio. "A polar current comes down this way and wells up between Beta and Asteria." She grinned at them. "Some of it gets over to us, bringing some fog. But the effects are much more pronounced over there. There'll be good fishing and lots of moisture near the coast with a north wind, but clear and sunny when it comes the other way." She pointed to a small group of numbered islands. "Any of these 12-300's should do."

Bik looked at his "partner" and Suwon nodded.

"Let's go, then," he said.

Port Tannhauser was a controlled riot, its sleepy streets filled with people. They had to anchor Mabel's seaplane well out in the harbor and raft in. Fortunately, once the cybes confirmed that they were physically present, they were eligible to register their choices at a public terminal.

Just in time, it turned out. There were still a couple of hours to go for registration, but when they unfolded the map, the entire area was red with claimants except for a pink fringe that included the western islands.

"We'll see the sights, have dinner at the Crab House and fly back to spend the night at my place, and fly out there early next morning."

"Uh," Bik asked, "why not just go there directly? Your place is in the opposite direction. All I have to do is touch down and leave an occupancy marker. Then you could leave me at the air terminal on the way back. I wouldn't have to impose."

Suwon looked at the ground, her lips tight. Did she, Bik wondered, have something else in mind for the night? Did she think he was out of line for suggesting something other than what Mabel had suggested? Was she just momentarily tired? Damn his inability to read people—the cybes should outlaw nonverbal communication. But, he thought ruefully, any experienced cybe could probably do better than he did. Kai had complained, gently at first, then with increasing sarcasm and severity, about his lack of sensitivity to her needs. She'd had a point—something always seemed to be going on among other people, some form of communication, that excluded him. But he couldn't help it; all he had to go on, really, was what people's words meant; the rest was just too uncertain.

"I have to get back too," Mabel declared, and smiled at him. "Don't forget, I have to claim my place as well. I was allowed to preregister the claim, but that's all."

"Oh," Bik responded, relieved to have some clear priority, "in that case, I look forward to it."

Suwon looked up and smiled at him. He returned an embarrassed grin, still uncertain.

On the way back from registration, they visited a small museum in the northern section of Port Tannhauser, an easy hike up from the harbor on the randomly corrugated fused sand walkway. The buildings along

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the way were preciously eclectic, many showing an old German influence to be sure, but really products of their owners' fantasies. The exterior of the museum itself was carefully authentic, and wouldn't have been out of place in sixteenth century Heidelberg.

Inside, Bik, Suwon, and Mabel browsed through holographic dioramas of Port Tannhauser during the various stages of the terraforming project. The first showed the hellish original surface, and almost glowed. Then came a dark fairyland of carbon dioxide snow. This was followed by a glacier being eaten away by massive excavators on the edge of a starlit liquid nitrogen sea with the arc of the CMR on the horizon. Then came a dramatic stormswept boiling-nitrogen seascape lit by the first rays of the sun allowed through the sunshield. The sight made him shiver. It was followed by a dry desert overlooking a deep empty basin speckled with mining robots. There was another, gentler, storm scene from early in the forty years of rain, showing the half-filled basins and massive waterfalls. Then finally a fuzzy, meadow-like shore covered with the first bioforming grasses.

There were artifacts as well, ranging from a broken pair of recreational skis used by scientists monitoring the carbon dioxide snowfall eight hundred years ago, to a comet shepherd child's duck. That had somehow survived the entry and breakup of a water shipment to be discovered floating on the Port Tannhauser beach. It sat on the museum shelf with a picture of its former owner, now living on a ring colony in the Kuiper belt of the Kruger 60 system.

Bik, who had only been looking for a home to share with his son, left with a sense of his chance to become part of the history of a new world. To look back over the past twelve hundred years let him see the next twelve hundred, or twelve thousand, more clearly. He could be in at the beginning and contribute his name to legend. It was a chance that few understood, an opportunity that fewer grabbed. Thinking like Suwon, now, he thought wryly. How could someone so completely overwhelm him in less than a day? Yet it was the second time. A second chance.

Only an hour remained of the registration period when they returned to the seaside and ordered dinner. The light-ringed harbor, except for Mabel's plane, was deserted; everyone had headed out to their claims to be there at the start of the homesteading window.

They were well into some fairly tasty hand-made *Crabe Asteria* when they heard what sounded like a muffled thunderclap. They looked out the restaurant window to the harbor, now lit by a bright orange flame climbing up from its center.

"My plane!" Mabel cried.

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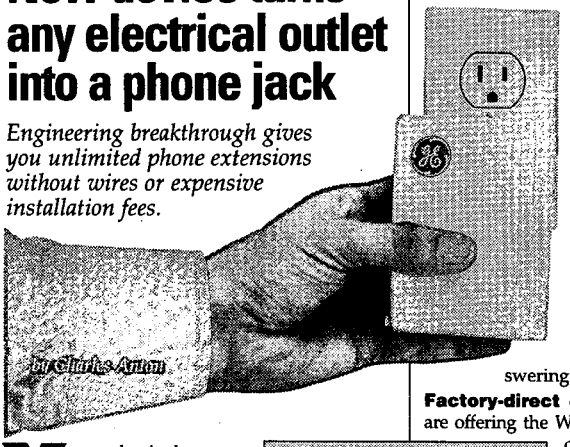
TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

New device turns any electrical outlet into a phone jack

Engineering breakthrough gives you unlimited phone extensions without wires or expensive installation fees.



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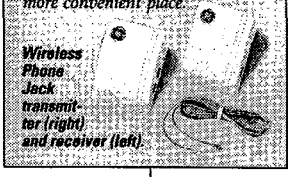
- **Other phone devices.** *You want to move your answering machine, modem or fax machine to a more convenient place.*



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Bik was on his feet and out the door, meaning to grab a fire extinguisher and swim for it. But the local anti-fire utility had what remained of the plane covered in foam by the time he got to the water's edge. Mabel and Suwon were right behind him.

Mabel looked grim. "Repro and shipment say it will take three days to replace the plane; too much in the queue just now with all the new settlers. I'm . . . This is outrageous!"

"Maybe we can borrow a maintenance vehicle?" Bik hazarded.

Suwon concentrated, then shook her head. "Everything that can be borrowed has been borrowed. They've only got the minimum needed for emergencies. Like that." She gestured to the flames.

They stood silently for a minute trying to absorb the disaster. To have come so far, Bik thought, and then this. He was sure the lawyers had something to do with it—what could they do with money, he wondered, that made it worth doing this to someone to get it?

"I'm sorry, Mabel," he choked out. "Your homestead . . . If it hadn't been for me they wouldn't have done this. And Bikki . . . I feel like . . . ."

"They aren't going to get away with it," she declared, her voice a calm, cheerful bell against the gloom. "I've already filed a protest saying who I think did it and why. I'll get my land, and you'll get yours." Mabel pursed her lips. "But not before Wendt has your kid on the way to Kalinda station! You think a nice home environment with plenty of elbow room will make that much difference to a custody board?"

"There's no telling what a human board will do, but I'm told it will help a lot."

"Well, then," Mabel said, "we have a long hike ahead of us."

Bik's Mercury conditioned feet and muscles suddenly remembered where they were. "Hike?"

"First to the land registration office. It's open for another fifteen minutes."

There was a human clerk there, a very tall, dark-skinned woman in a simple blue robe with a bemused smile on her face. She clearly knew Mabel, but simply took Mabel's hand by way of greeting; the difference in their heights would have made an embrace embarrassing for both of them.

"Hi Mabel! Good to see you, but I don't think I can help anyone. Everything's gone and there's no transportation anyway. People have to be on the property when the sun rises here, in about twenty-five hours."

"Kris. I know. I want to open my island up to registration. Abandon my priority."

Suwon sucked in a breath and Kris' eyes went wide.

"But . . . whatever you say. It's going to come out as two parcels."

"Right. Register me for the one with the old station, and Bik Wu, here,

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for the rest of it. See if you can wriggle the dividing line down to the north beach."

Kris concentrated a moment. "You've got it." She handed an intelliprint to Mabel that showed the division. "But how are you going to get there?"

"Dawn on Venus," Mabel declared, "is low tide. The strait narrows down to a shallow only a couple of kilometers across. We're going to hike a dozen kilometers over the hills to South Point, and then swim."

Bik's mouth dropped, and he might have collapsed if Suwon hadn't put her arm around him.

The ground trail was easy, the gravity was not. Bik pushed himself until his legs gave out about five kilometers from the coast and he could not stand up. Suwon and Mabel cut down a couple of small trees with the emergency knife in Suwon's jump belt. Then they made a travois hammock from their clothes. Bik's jump tights formed the makeshift harness for Suwon and Mabel to use to put the weight of the travois on their shoulders. Mabel donated her green jumpsuit to tie the bottoms of the poles so that they wouldn't spread apart more than the path width.

Bik was intrigued to find the women were wearing simple, functional white support halters under their shifts. In Mercury's lower gravity, most women didn't bother with support garments, and instead used their bodies to display all kinds of rings, tattoos, and other decorations. But the Venusian women's bodies were completely bare of any decoration, and Suwon seemed to find Bik's own utilitarian nipple rings an item of amusement. His intellicard hung from one and a holo of Junior on his second birthday from the other. But he was much too exhausted to care about differing aesthetics as he dragged himself onto the rig.

They pulled him for two kilometers to the crest of the trail before he told them to stop.

"It's downhill now. Let me try walking again," he suggested. "I can use the poles as walking sticks. They can support my arms and let me use my arm muscles to help support the rest of me. You can have your clothes back. It's getting cold." With a light western breeze, it was getting about as chilly as it got in the Venusian tropical lowlands.

"That's because you've been lying on your back for an hour!" Suwon objected. "I'm sweating."

"I'll take mine, thank you," Mabel said. "I'm a lot smaller and lose heat faster."

Bik grabbed a branch hanging over the path and carefully stood up again. His knees burned and feet ached, but otherwise he simply felt tired.

They disassembled the travois and cut a meter from its poles. Bik took

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one in each hand and started out again, half hanging on, half pushing with the poles, while Mabel shrugged into her jumpsuit. Suwon tied the other two jumpsuits together and draped them over her neck. The women quickly caught up to him, but walked behind, letting him set the pace.

Bik's calves ached on the verge of cramping with each step, but he forced himself to a slow, regular pace, somewhat like a cross-country skier in slow motion. Very slow. Less, he thought, than half a kilometer an hour. Would it be enough? The exertion made him sweat profusely and the waistband of his shorts was beginning to chafe. He was miserable, but he had to continue. Everything was at stake.

After an eternity of pain, they reached the shoreline and he sprawled in the cool sand. They had a clear view of the western horizon, and it was already a brilliant orange: only Earth and Mercury were still visible in the brightening sky.

Suwon came over to him, stripped for the swim. She laughed, a bit self-consciously. "Curious?"

"Oh. Uh, didn't mean to stare. The fashion on Mercury is to have all sorts of things—" He self-consciously unclipped his intellicard from its ring. "—dyed or clipped on your body. There's nothing there but, well, you. You're very—bare."

"I like it that way, at least for swimming. Come on, give me your stuff. I'll stash it under a rock and we'll pick it up later. If you think those shorts were chafing on the hike, wait until you see what a couple of hours in salt water do."

After all this, could he swim for two hours? He was mentally exhausted from fighting unaccustomed aches and pains, but his wind was holding up well and now that he was off his feet, he seemed to be reviving. In the water, gravity wouldn't matter. Anyway, he had no choice. He removed what remained of his clothes and gave them to Suwon, who bundled them up with hers and Mabel's and put them under a big rock in from the shoreline.

Mabel, looking more like some ethereal bronzed nymph than a grown woman, took one side of him and Suwon the other as they waded into the gentle surf. It was cold to start with, but getting rid of his weight seemed to restore his energy. He established a smooth crawl at about two seconds a stroke, breathing on every other left arm, a pace which felt well within his capabilities.

The women easily matched him.

A hundred meters later he tired and switched to a back stroke.

Mabel glided by him effortlessly, leaving no wake that Bik could see.

Suwon pulled up to him with an easy side stroke. "I know that feels like a rest, but you should get back to your crawl as soon as you can. It's

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a much more efficient distance-eater. Vary your pace, if you have to, but keep going."

Bik nodded and resumed, one hand over another, breathing every time now. It went on and on. The shore behind them receded but the island shore seemed to get no closer. Stroke, breathe, stroke.

A few minutes or an eternity later he faltered to a breast stroke, just enough to keep his feet up.

"Look," Suwon called. "The sunshield rim!"

On the crest of the next wave, Bik saw it: a tiny golden arc over the wavetops.

"Then we've lost," he croaked. It was all for nothing. Mabel would lose her homestead, he would lose his son, Suwon would lose her chance for land on which to settle down.

"Come on!" Mabel shouted from ahead, her musical voice carrying clearly over the waves. Then she added in short phrases between breaths: "We're on the west side of the time zone. And we're seeing it early. It's really below the horizon. Because of refraction. Venus only rotates at about, uh, four-tenths of a degree an hour. Astronomical sunrise isn't for another hour yet. We can still make it. Come on, keep stroking."

With renewed desperation, Bik plunged ahead. His arms, he told himself, weren't nearly as tired as the rest of him. Ahead, Suwon was fighting her own battle, silently maintaining the pace she had started, not looking anywhere but ahead at the still-distant dark shore of the island.

Bik heard the buzz of a fan skimmer, but he didn't see where. Then, so quickly he had no time to think, it was coming right at him, out of the gloom of the island shore, skimming the wave tops. Instinctively he ducked underwater as it roared over him.

That was it, he thought as he surfaced. If they were going to do that to him, he was done. He had no strength left. No energy. There was maybe one thing he could do, though.

"Mabel!" He shouted, took a stroke, and caught a breath. "They want me. Go on. Get your land. I'll keep them busy. They can't stop all of us."

He saw the skimmer this time—a blur to his wet, unfocused eyes—as it looped around to come at him again. With a supreme effort, he waved a fist at them and resumed his crawl. He looked left and right and couldn't see the women—underwater, he hoped. Okay, bastards, he thought as the fan skimmer grew in front of him. Do your worst. I'm not stopping. I'm not ducking. Too damn tired.

Off to his right, something came up out of the waves, high up. He couldn't see it clearly; a head on two necks? It bent back, whipped forward and its "head" flew off toward him. Then his vision cleared some and in this instant he saw it was a large rock, and standing on the water was . . . but the skimmer was on him and despite himself he ducked deep

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and heard a solid tick as the rock bounced off the skimmer and slammed into the water somewhere behind him.

What he thought he had seen was a woman standing high on the waves silhouetted against the rising sun, proud and triumphant like the goddess Venus herself.

He surfaced, exhausted, barely able to float, and glanced behind him as he gasped for air. The fan skimmer, its hum wavering now, was heading away, not coming back.

"Bik!" Suwon called. "Put your legs down! We're here!"

He rolled, put his feet down, and looked toward her voice, toward the sun. To this surprise there was sand barely a meter under him. Suwon was standing on the sea off to his right, about ankle deep. She was, his numb mind finally realized, on a higher part of the sand bar.

"Grab this! I hit them!" she shouted, gleeful. "I threw a big rock behind you with both hands. When you ducked, they nosed down right into it!"

Bik looked toward the island, dazed. It was there. Close by. He couldn't remember it getting so close. He caught his breath in great gasps. It was all he could do to stand on the shallow bar, even with the fortunately calm water helping, but if he didn't try to move, he was okay. The sun was clearly up now, huge on the horizon, shining through the sunshield with its rim just touching the lower rim of the sunshield, and both just touching the horizon.

"We made it," Mabel called from the beach. "I've reported us in, and they'll give you credit for getting on the bar. Less legal mess that way. You've got land."

Suwon splashed down the slope of the bar to him, and with her help Bik found the strength to wade ashore. Then he collapsed on the cool sand of the beach.

"Do you think it will be enough?" Mabel asked as he caught his breath.

Bik managed a weak shrug. "I hope so."

It took him a dozen seconds to say anything else. "At least Junior will know I tried." Breathe. "That might be important to him someday. I did everything I could."

"What about getting a wife?" The gleam in Mabel's eyes belied the innocent tone of her voice.

"Mabel! I found him first!" Suwon protested, then stared open-mouthed.

"That's quite all right, dear. I have a half-dozen perfectly good relationships going."

"Why you old—matchmaker. You tricked me!"

Mabel laughed and turned to Bik with a sly grin. "Well, what about it, Bik? Take a chance on her? I've known her for thirty years, which isn't much these days, but that's all she's got. You couldn't do any better."

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Bik shook his head and stared at the sea. She was too much like Kai, he told himself: too wild and spontaneous. She was someone who jumped off three-hundred-kilometer bridges for fun: someone who probably had a wrong take on him, because, once, scared to death and for something that mattered more to him than his own life, he had jumped with her. She was someone who was willing to risk a putative eternity with someone she knew less than twenty-four hours just to accomplish a goal, to complete a mission. No way, except . . . except that, with the board, it might work. And if he were really committed, he'd do everything.

"How about an engagement?" he asked. "Give us six months to get to know each other?"

"That sounds very reasonable." Mabel shook her head. "But I'm sure Mr. Wendt's lawyers will point out that if you call it off, it will be too late to give Bik, junior, back to the starship captain. I'd say they'll want to see at least a twenty-year contract. Suwon, dear, are you really sure?"

"Hell, no. If I were, it wouldn't be so exciting. Grab this, Mabel, Bik. Nothing's certain. It all depends on initial conditions, chance, and how you play it—like a jump. But I like the weather."

"Well," Mabel added, "in the old days, a lot of good marriages started when the parents matched you with someone you'd never seen before. Other people dated for a decade, lived together, got married and still broke up. Only question is if you're committed to it long enough to raise Bikki. There are some things, Suwon, that people have to *make* certain."

Suwon sat beside him, her bare arm and thigh burning against his. "You can count on me, Bik."

He could almost feel her purr. Talk about leaping into space!

In his mind, Bik could hear Kai laughing at her. You'll never get to first base with that wimp, his ex would have said to Suwon. For the first time, Bik found himself a little angry with his mental image of Kai, and it dawned on him that Kai perhaps had not really been such an exemplar of womanhood, that their split had not necessarily been all his fault, and that what she would have said about Suwon shouldn't really be his measure of things.

Bik set his jaw and reached for Suwon's firm, callused, hand. She was not Kai. Her whole body, her attitude, was different from Kai's, and maybe better. She did wild things, and thought wild thoughts, true, but, unlike Kai, there was nothing flaky about how she did them. Suwon seemed competent and responsible. And she dared to take responsibility.

His thoughts were interrupted as she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him on the lips, and seemed to melt into him. He kissed back, tentatively at first, then with increasing warmth. Despite his tiredness, his body started to respond.

Mabel cleared her throat, Bik released Suwon, and they all laughed.

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But strangely, he felt no real embarrassment, nor urgency either. Everything felt very easy and natural. It would be like that with Suwon, he realized—just fun. With Kai there had always been tension, a performance, an evaluation, something to live up to.

Bik shook his head, sighed, and looked at Mabel. "Can we just register the contract?" he asked. "At least that's how we did it on Mercury."

Mabel nodded. "I'll send it in and witness it. There, I've bent-piped my audio to the registrar; it hears what I hear. Do you two want a twenty-year marriage contract? Bik?"

He took a breath and let go for the second time today. "Yes."

"Suwon?"

"Yes."

"Congratulations! May I kiss the groom?"

"Wait until I'm done," Suwon objected, and launched another round of physical affection, including Mabel this time. Bik felt embarrassed at first, but that passed into simple goodness.

The next morning, universal time, Bik sat in Mabel's dome wearing a beach towel as a sort of ersatz sarong, looking at the iron-gray crew cut and steel cold blue eyes of lawyer Deccar Brunt. "We did not anticipate such resolve on your part, Mr. Wu. As your lawyers, and the cybernetic advisors have undoubtedly told you by now, you are in a commanding position from a legal standpoint."

Bik wondered if Brunt had bribed someone to monitor his calls. It didn't matter. The cybes had traced the attack and Mabel's friends had turned a few screws of their own. Bik simply nodded. Yes, his being married now, and having a rich, open environment in which to raise Junior was one plus. But the opposition's tactics, starting from withholding his messages and presents, and running right through the attempts to interfere with his getting the homestead were now all faithfully recorded and arrayed against them. It would be, everyone conceded, an open and shut custody board decision.

"However," the attorney continued, no trace of caring in his voice, "Captain Wendt would like to plead to you in the child's interest."

"He's here?"

The attorney nodded. "Your bimbo almost killed him with a rock while he was driving, perfectly legally, well over your head, after his inspection of this jungle to which you want to take Ted."

It made sense—Wendt was too smart to risk a conspiracy; he'd do his own dirty work. Bik squirmed momentarily at the mention of the name Wendt had given Junior. Suwon, who had managed to fit tightly into a loose shift of Mabel's, put a hand on Bik's shoulder. There was no point in working themselves up by arguing with a professional liar.

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But Suwon tensed suddenly. "Then Bikki's here too! Wendt wouldn't have dared to leave Bikki two months away in the asteroid belt if he expected to win a custody battle!"

"Yes, *Ted* is here," Brunt said, his voice grating at the interruption. "Perhaps you should first listen to what he has to say."

A young male child's image appeared in the holo stage. A legend assured them it was a faithful recording of a board interview with "Ted Wendt." The boy seemed relaxed and polite, gave his name as Ted Wendt, and declared that he did not want to go to live with "Mr. Wu."

That image was replaced by a picture of a genial, fit man in a starship captain's coveralls.

"Well, Mr. Wu, we appear to have had some misunderstandings—"

Bik dismissed this with a gesture.

"I really don't mean you or your new wife any harm, however, if you really care for this young man—" the field expanded to include Junior, sitting quietly in a comfortable chair behind Wendt, staring at the floor "—you need to consider his view of this. I recognize that you might feel that what we did in restricting communications to keep his identity straight was a little unfair to you, but that's all by the by. *Fait accompli.* You have to deal with the situation as it is, however unfair.

"You could win this legally with the cybe's evidence. I'll concede that. But that would devastate my son. The fact is that I'm the only father he's known; Ted was only three when your marriage ended and you left his life. It's the reality he knows that counts. Please consider his interests. If you really want a child, have another one."

Bik shifted uncomfortably. However unfair the situation, the argument made too much sense.

"He's never been on a high-gravity planet." Wendt continued. "He wants to go out on starships with me and see the rest of the universe, not be stuck on some artificial hot-house garden world. It's not fair to take him from the only father he's ever known, especially in view of his mother's recent death. I suppose this doesn't mean anything to you, but I loved Kai, and he's all I have left of her."

Suwon touched Bik's arm and looked wide-eyed at him. "No, no, it's not," she whispered, then turned to Mabel. Something went between them.

Mabel concentrated, then her eyes went wide. "The inheritance. Kai left it all to Bikki!"

Bik took a breath. Had there been some good in Kai after all, something that had been worth his love? Some mothering instinct that had put her son ahead of her selfishness? But that tainted money didn't matter now, nor did the property rights. All that mattered was—damn, what did matter?

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Wendt appeared not to hear anything and made a helpless, open-handed gesture. "I don't have a legal leg to stand on, I know it. So I'm pleading with you. Don't ruin two lives, Ted's and mine, just to get back at Kai for going off with me. She's dead now. Gone. Please just let us be."

Bik stared at the floor. If . . . if they'd made their appeal that way in the first place.

"I," he began, then hesitated. "I don't want to hurt anyone. . . ."

Suwon's hand clamped on Bik's shoulder like a vice. "Don't you dare give in," she whispered, "I grab that recording's a morph, at least the audio, fake as hell. Otherwise we would have got it realtime." Then she said, loud, "Can he see us, Wendt? Can he hear us?"

Bik looked up. Wendt made a nervous gesture to someone offstage and moved his lips. The sound didn't come through. The boy nodded slightly and stared at the floor again.

"Wu," Wendt pleaded, "You heard the recording; he doesn't want to go. I'm sure he remembers what to say. Why put him through that?"

"I'll bet Brunt gets to manage the estate while they're gone," Mabel whispered. "Bik, it stinks."

"I know," he whispered back. "But does that justify hurting my kid?"

"Bik, he'll understand," Suwon pleaded. "Trust me."

Another leap, Bik told himself, and you're still alive after the first two. If Junior didn't remember, it was all over, he'd look ridiculous and prove Wendt was right; that his custody fight would just be ruining lives for his own self-gratification. But no one who had pulled the crap Wendt had pulled could be that good a father, and some memories go way back. At the very least Bikki needed to know he hadn't been abandoned; to know that Bik cared and always had cared. Bik decided to take the leap.

"Bikki," Bik said.

The boy looked up, through the holoviewer, at Bik, and expressions of recognition, confusion, and wonder crossed his young face.

"Daddy?"

In that one word, Bik saw a future unfold before him. A wife, a son to raise, and maybe a daughter. A huge rambling house with lanais all around and a pool leading right to the ocean. Friends. But space to be alone, too. Fishing trips. Bik, junior, would grow up here, maybe go to the stars and come back with kids of his own in a century or two. And he and Suwon would be here. Forever? It seemed possible. Anything seemed possible, if he could just reach out. Now.

Bik stood up, grabbed Suwon's hand and stared the tight-lipped spaceman in the eyes. "Wendt, get out of there and let me talk to my son." ●

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THE 1995 ISAAC ASIMOV AWARD

Sheila Williams

Photo credit: Beth Gwinn

Isaac Asimov Award Finalists: Monica Eiland, Holly Day, Shannon Fowler, Chris Gattanella

Shannon Fowler, a biology and literature major at the University of California, San Diego, received the 1995 Isaac Asimov Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing on March 25. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, which co-sponsored the award with *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, flew the author to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, for an all-expense paid weekend at the annual Conference on the Fantastic. Shannon received the award for her story, "The Cinderella Project," two days after her twenty-first birthday.

The Asimov Award winner, and the award's other finalists, were chosen by Gardner Dozois, myself, and IAFA Award Administrator Rick Wilber. At Saturday evening's sumptuous banquet, I presented Shannon with her

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award certificate and a check for $500 from *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine. Although worn out from an overly long and grueling cross-continental flight, our winner was a delightful dinner companion. In addition to her double major, she told us she is working on a minor in photography, and hopes to become a marine biologist. We wish her the best of luck with all of her endeavors.

I also had the opportunity to personally present first runner-up Monica Eiland, a student at the University of North Carolina, with a certificate for her story "Hansel's Statement to the Police." Monica received a two-year subscription to *Asimov's* just in time—the one-year subscription she won in last year's contest was about to run out. Our second runner-up, Raakesh Persaud, could not join us in Florida. This University of Toronto undergraduate garnered the award and a one-year subscription to *Asimov's* for his story "Come Walk a Mile in My Shoes."

Two of our honorable mentions, Chris Gattanella and Holly Day, collected their certificates at the banquet. Chris, a student at the University of Georgia, was recognized for "Treaty Games," while Holly, an undergraduate at the University of Tampa, won for "Jesus Christ, Lord of Hosts, Meets L.A. County." Chris Hepler from Johns Hopkins University, received an honorable mention for his story, "This Thing of Darkness," but could not be in attendance.

We are now actively looking for next year's winner. The deadline for submissions to the contest is December 1, 1995. All full-time undergraduate students at any accredited university or college are eligible. Stories must be in English, and should run from 1,000 to 10,000 words. No submission can be returned and all stories must be previously unpublished and unsold. There is no limit to the number of submissions from each writer. Each submission must include the writer's name, address, phone number, and college or university on the cover sheet, but please remove your name from the manuscript.

Submissions and contest guidelines request should be sent to:

Asimov Award
USF 3177
4202 E. Fowler
Tampa, FL 33620-3177

For more information, contact:

Rick Wilber
School of Mass Communications
University of South Florida
Tampa, FL 33620

Next year's winner will be announced at the 1996 Conference on the Fantastic and in the pages of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine.

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Paul Di Filippo

TAKE ME TO THE PILOT

For the first time, Paul Di Filippo—one of *Asimov's* regular book reviewers—appears in our pages wearing his fiction writer's hat. Mr. Di Filippo's collection of three novellas, *The Steam Punk Trilogy*, is just out from Four Walls Eight Windows. A grant from the Rhode Island State Council for the Arts will help fund the work on his next novel, *Fuzzy Dice*.

Illustration by Pat Morrissey

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It had been one hell of a week.

Not for me personally so much as for the world.

On Monday, Mount Fuji, dormant since 1707, had come alive in a cap-shattering explosion, spewing ashes and cinders over Tokyo like a choking smoker the size of Godzilla. As a red carpet of lava crept closer to the city, millions were being hastily evacuated.

On Tuesday, a mile-wide, mile-long crack in the earth appeared in a tectonically stable area of Mongolia, swallowing hundreds of yaks and a dozen mounted herdsmen. The Russians still weren't quite sure how deep it was, because their expedition to investigate had been wiped out by a freak tornado.

From Wednesday through Friday, a global epidemic of cancer remissions had doctors chewing on their stethoscopes and discharging formerly terminal patients by the thousands. The vacated beds were promptly taken by hundreds of women with spontaneous midterm pregnancies, some of them occurring in certified virgins.

Late Friday evening, something invisible clipped the spire off the Chrysler Building as neatly as a gardener trims a rose. The detached spire floated across Manhattan until it was over the Central Park Reservoir, whereupon it plunged into the water tip-first, sending a splash wave to flood the basement of the Metropolitan Museum.

On Saturday, the full moon rose colored lime-green.

On Sunday, it didn't rise at all.

Naturally, the world's population was in a panic. Religious leaders of all stripes were proclaiming their various revelations. Politicians were urging calm while they raced for their hardened shelters. Scientists were holding forth with contradictory theories and asking for billions for more study. Desperate people in the street were turning to bookies, bartenders, shrinks, and mystics for answers and solace.

As for me, I went to see my friend Darwin Vroom.

I had a hunch he might know what was going on.

Might even have a *hand* in it.

You see, ever since Darwin came back from discovering Atlantis—that was right after the trip into the interior of the sun, but *before* the incident with the intelligent ants—he hadn't been quite himself. I could tell that something big was bothering him, some riddle whose handle he couldn't quite grab.

And when *Darwin* got like that, there was no telling *what* might happen, as he flailed creatively around for a solution.

Darwin lived in a converted carriage house in the Elmhurst section of town—a very nice district. I remembered when he first moved in. The neighbors soon raised quite a ruckus. Understandably, of course. That forty-foot-tall robot, the nonhuman languages employed by the nocturnal

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visitors, the tunneling machines, the inertialess aerial dogfights . . . enough of that would make *any*one who didn't know Darwin a little nervous!

My buddy had responded by buying out the entire neighborhood, at twice its valuation. Sixty acres. Paid the city twenty years' property tax in advance to grease the deal. Now there was a intelligent fence around the entire property, and Darwin was the only resident.

I stopped my car by the front gate. It wasn't really a *gate,* naturally, but a kind of glistening synthetic web with a cybernetic spider hanging in the center.

The spider wiggled its palps in a creepy way. "State your name and purpose."

"Burnett Thompson, and I—"

"Burn!" exclaimed the spider in Darwin's voice. "You're just in time! C'mon up!"

The spider began eating its web, and soon I was able to drive through the entrance.

The neighborhood had certainly changed since the last time I had been there.

The splendid houses of Elmhurst were being disassembled by swarms of mechanical termites. The houses closest to the fence were just giant piles of dull-colored dust. I knew that Darwin had big plans for the land. For starters, he intended some kind of weapons emplacements against his temporarily quiescent enemies, like the neutron-star creatures. And he had made an offhand comment to me once about an orbital-transfer stalk. . . .

But deconstruction had to precede those schemes, and so Darwin had loosed his insect disassemblers first.

I pulled up in front of the carriage house, located at the center of the enclave, and got out of the car. I had to squint against the sharp sunlight reflected off the building's titanium sheathing, but once I was standing under the shade of the floating laser defense platforms, I could see normally again.

I rang the doorbell, and, much to my surprise, Darwin himself appeared.

I say "appeared" rather than "opened the door," since Darwin used the teleport disk built into the front porch.

It had been ten years since we had attended college together. Me, Darwin, and Jean. It was Jean who, in a moment of drunken insight, altered Darwin's last name from "Froom" to "Vroom," permanently rechristening him in tribute to his hyperactive mind and mannerisms.

I often wondered how Jean was doing these days, married to the Galactic Overlord. A sleazy character, if you ask *me.* That goatee . . . ! But

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there's no predicting who a woman will fall for, I guess. Anyway, I never let myself dwell too long on her choice—painful for all concerned—to leave Earth behind for life as Queen of the Greater Cosmos.

In that busy decade since Darwin had graduated with his three-and-a-half degrees (the half was in Provençal poetry), my friend had not altered one whit. The unruly hair, the face that always reminded me of Harold Lloyd's, the knobby wrists, the inside-out T-shirts, the childlike fondness for kelp-flavored ice-cream (made expressly for him by Ben & Jerry's) . . . he was the same brilliant, albeit slightly unfocused, genius who comes along only once in a geological era that he had *always* been.

Nothing seemed to leave its mark on him. Not earning his first billion. (I had helped a little with that; a small matter of cheap biomimetics; the "Love Trousers" alone had brought us one hundred million apiece.) Not battling the lobster-men. Not getting lost in the underground Martian ruins. Not mis-timing that nova. Only lately had he seemed a little different, troubled by a puzzle he hadn't seen fit to share with me yet.

After Darwin stepped off the disk and we shook hands, I broached the subject of my visit.

"Darwin, have you been following last week's news—?"

Holding up a hand in a stop gesture, Darwin interrupted me, as was his wont. "I own up to the cancer cures and the pregnancies, but the *rest* of the stuff is the work of someone else!"

"I knew it! I just *knew* you'd have the answers the whole world is awaiting! Why, this reminds me of that time with Antimatter Earth. . . ."

"It's even *more* serious than *that*. And there's a lot worse to come. Unless we act fast. Follow me!"

Darwin employed the transport plate and vanished. So did I.

We emerged in a long windowless room filled with strange devices. I recognized a Kalvonic transmogrifier and a rack of gluon torpedoes, but much else was new to me.

"You've redone the attic," I guessed.

"Hardly. We're half a mile below the surface. I designed this as a safe haven from most of the folks who bear me a grudge. But it's proven useless against what I'm contending with now. This hidden chamber with all its defenses is as open as a puptent to the guy I'm chasing—if he should turn his attention on it. But it's as safe—or unsafe—as anywhere else, and all the equipment's here, so I'm continuing to use it."

"I don't get it, Darwin. What are we up against?"

Darwin sighed. I knew that he hated explaining things to someone who thought as slowly as I did—my IQ was only in the low 500's—but he also valued our friendship. After all, I had saved his life at least a dozen times, not the least of which was last year, when his pressure suit

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failed on Jupiter. So he made the extra effort to phrase things so that I could understand.

"Have you ever felt, Burn, that our world is not the *real* one? That there might exist a higher level of reality somewhere?"

"You're not talking about hyperspace or the Funny Zone, are you?"

"No, those are merely topological quirks of our *own* universe, integral pieces of our spacetime continuum. The kind of thing I have in mind is another order of existence entirely. This transcendent plane would stand in relation to *our* universe as our universe stands in relation to cyberspace. Our whole plenum would be nothing more than an information shadow, so to speak, contained within this higher realm. And just as you or I can easily manipulate the contents of Virtual Reality in a godlike manner, so would the inhabitants of *this* plane be able to manipulate *our* reality, should they choose to do so. Nothing we can do on this level can affect *them,* but *they* can reach *us* simply by extending a hand!"

Even *my* puny brain was able to put two and two together. "This is not all just empty speculation, is it, Darwin? You've actually visited this incredible realm?"

"Right you are, Burn! It's taken me some time to learn the ropes there. Not that I'm totally confident even yet. Hence the little mixup with all those pregnancies on our Earth. But, unfortunately, I've run out of time for experimentation. You see, I've alarmed someone—or *something*—that lives there. And he—or she, or *it*—is the one who's been causing all the trouble, like the disappearance of the moon. I've got to stop him before he wreaks further harm. I think that, between the two of us, we've got a good chance to neutralize him. Are you game?"

"Game? For the biggest adventure of our career? You've *got* to be kidding, Darwin! I wouldn't miss *this* one for all the living jewels in the Galactic Overlord's slave-mines!"

Darwin clapped me on the shoulder. "I *knew* I could count on you, Burn! Let's go!"

"How do we get there, Darwin? Do we use the Photon Clipper? The Phantosphere? The X-Crawler? The Neutrino Tube?"

"You're still stuck in *our* universe with any of those conveyances, Burn. You haven't made the mental leap yet. This new plane—call it 'the oververse'—is simultaneously as close as your own skin, yet further away than the Silent Quasar. No, we can only reach this new plane by a combination of psychic and sensory adaptations."

A mechanical valet wheeled up on its quiet treads just then. Two of its arms held what looked to me like full-body VR rigs, while its third appendage supported a tray bearing two drinks.

"Get dressed," Darwin ordered, and I did without further questioning.

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(The last time I had bothered to doubt Darwin, we had ended up lost in the jungles of Venus, circa one million B.C.)

Once clad head-to-toe in our rigs, with our helmet visors still raised, Darwin picked up a glass and I did likewise.

"This is a recipe I worked out with Terence McKenna and Sandoz Labs. Psilocybin, lysergic acid, and nitrous oxide encapsulated in micronodules, among other constituents. Along with the biomimetic circuitry built into these suits, it will transport us to the oververse."

"Can we take any equipment?"

"Negative, pardner. In fact, you're in for a small surprise when we get there!"

So saying, Darwin quaffed his drink. I followed suit.

"We'd better lie down," Darwin advised.

Dropping our visors, we reclined on luxurious couches that I recognized as salvage from the Kingdom of Opar.

I waited for the glory of the oververse to burst upon me.

Slowly, like a mountain of sugar melting under the kiss of a rainbowed mist, the familiar universe in which Darwin and I had experienced all our thrilling adventures began to *dissolve*. My stomach felt kind of like it had that time the Space Pirates from the Magellanic Cloud had shot us with their Distress Pistols. Luckily, I hadn't eaten any breakfast, aside from a Miracle Pill.

Everything got dark. Much to my surprise, I felt the transport rig vanishing right off my body, along with my street clothes. Amoeboid blobs of light began to float and bob, weave and interlace, finally coalescing into something that might have been a coherent scene.

I blinked twice, and things snapped into focus.

Trimmed grass striped like peppermint canes stretched away infinitely on all sides. The pink-and-white turf was broken at intervals by multi-branched trees that resembled cotton-candy cones, fluffy tops on trunks that tapered to a point where they entered the lawn. Scattered across the grass were trillions of grazing flop-eared rabbits. Only they were colored a zillion different colors, some of which I had no names for. It was like a bunny Manhattan.

The sky—the sky was a vivid tartan plaid, and appeared to be stretched taut only slightly above the fuzzy treetops. Illumination came from the red stripes in the plaid.

Back in the subterranean room, Darwin had been standing on my left.

I turned to look for him.

All I saw was a creature that looked exactly like My Little Pony: a midget, neotenic, pastel-blue horse with an exaggeratedly long and flowing styled mane.

"Darwin. . . ?"

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The horse spoke. "Right you *are,* pard! Now, let's get cracking. There's no time to waste!"

I lifted what I meant to be my hand. Into my field of vision came a butterscotch-colored hoof and fetlock.

The pony that was Darwin began to caper away. I did not immediately follow.

"Darwin, hold on a minute, please. I've got a couple of questions."

It was hard for a My Little Pony to look irritated, but Darwin managed. "Okay. But hurry up. Every minute we dilly-dally here, something awful could be happening on Earth!"

Trying to rank my concerns in order of importance. I asked first, "You're sure, aren't you, Darwin, that this is really the oververse, the sublime realm which exists on a transcendent level of reality greater than anything we're accustomed to?"

"Yes."

I digested that for a moment. "And *this* is what humans look like in the oververse?" I waved a hoof to indicate myself.

"No. The humans are those rabbits, which *I* call smerps."

I studied the vast herds of rabbits—or smerps—for a moment. "Each of those creatures represents a particular human back on Earth, perhaps even an individual we know and love?"

"Only the olive-green ones are humans. Any smerp of a different color belongs to another species. All living things coexist harmoniously side by side in the oververse. Beetles, cacti, whales, Ganymedean slime worms. . . ."

"And these forms we now inhabit—?"

"They appear to be a reaction of the oververse to our unnatural intrusion. We're unique. We shouldn't see any others like us—*except* perhaps for the evil one we're after. Although he may well have learned how to alter his oververse shape after all these years."

"Where are our original bodies right now?"

"Still back where we started, lying unconscious under the influence of the drugs and travel-rigs."

I took another long look around. The oververse reminded me of a child's board game. Candyland. Uncle Wiggly. Chutes 'n' Ladders.

"Everything we experience in our old universe, all the glories and terrors, holy mysteries and vile sacrileges, springs from *this?* This crayon scribble?"

"Burn, you're making value judgments again. Why shouldn't something simple give birth to something complex? It happens all the time, even in the regular cosmos. I mean, hydrogen atoms are the basic building blocks of suns, right? Anyhow, I kind of *like* this place. It has the virtue of uncluttered simplicity."

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"It's brain-dead!"

"Ours is not to criticize, Burn. Just because you or I would've designed things differently is no reason to get all worked up. Now, let's go. We've still got to find the Pilot."

"The Pilot?"

"That's what I call the one who's messing up Earth. I tried dubbing him 'Doctor Strange,' but it didn't seem to fit. He's no master magician. More like the guy who crashed the *Exxon Valdez*. Even though I suspect he's been resident in the oververse for an unimaginably long time, he appears to be retarded. As gods go, he's definitely tenth-rate."

I was starting to feel like Darwin's personal echo, but I couldn't help it. "God? Does he really deserve that title?"

The My Little Pony who was Darwin assumed an expression of serious concern. "I'm afraid so, Burn. There's very little doubt that the majority of acts attributed to God are really the work of the Pilot."

I must've looked dubious, because Darwin continued.

"Haven't you ever wondered why—if there *was* a God—he seemed so arbitrary and capricious, overactive one century and inactive the next? Well, here we have the answer! God is a clumsy trespasser, like us. He's only arrived in the oververse during recent semi-historical times. Say the last quarter of a million years. Before then, the oververse ticked smoothly along, and so did Earth. But with the arrival of the *Pilot* and his blundering ways, things got out of kilter. Oh, there were always disasters and a general tendency toward entropy. But the Pilot has introduced a whole *new* level of irrationality. It's quite possible, for instance, for him to back both sides in the same war! And it's up to *us* to stop him. Let's move it!"

Darwin started to trot toward one of the cotton-candy trees. I caught up, and asked another question.

"Am I right in saying that everything in the oververse has a one-for-one relationship with something in the regular universe?"

"It's a little more complicated than that, but basically, yes."

"Well, what kind of havoc are we causing back on Earth by trampling this grass?"

"Luckily, this grass represents the cosmological constant, the invisible energy inherent in the vacuum between worlds. So our passage has little effect, other than to deplete the spacetime continuum slightly."

All around us, the smerps continued to nibble contentedly on the peppermint grass, ignoring us. I noticed other types of plants growing down among the stalks. For instance, a small-leafed thing with a cluster of purple berries, or one with a yellow cloverlike flower.

"What about these?"

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"The ones with the berries are pregnancy-makers. I accidentally stampeded some green smerps among a concentrated patch of them. They started eating, and you know the rest."

"Holy cow!"

"And the clover ones are cancer-causers. I shooed some other smerps away from those."

"Darwin, this is too big a responsibility! I mean, I know that we've held the fate of whole planets in our hands before. Even a dozen solar systems at once, like when the Eater of Darkness got loose. But *this* is something else entirely! Those other times, we always knew the capacities of our machines and the limits of our enemies. Here, one slight miscalculation and we could wipe out an entire galaxy!"

"Oh, easily! But we can't just let the Pilot hang out in here, now that we know about him, can we? It's our duty to rid the world of him!"

"I guess. . . ."

We reached the base of a fluff-topped tree, and Darwin spoke again.

"Each of these trees represents an entire class of objects. This is the 'natural planetary satellite' tree. It was by manipulating this tree that the Pilot caused Earth's moon to go green and then disappear."

I backed up nervously. "So we're going to restore the moon now?"

"Better than that. I suspect that the Pilot is still *here*."

The crown of the tree was so airy that I didn't see how anything could be hiding there, and said so.

"At the top of each tree is a gate into the tree's 'metaphysical control room.' That's where I believe the Pilot is hiding. I couldn't reach any of the gates alone, which is why I couldn't undo any of the changes. But with *your* help—"

I saw what Darwin meant. The lowest branches would just be attainable if he stood on my back.

So I sidled up against the tree and let Darwin clamber atop me. Four My Little Pony hooves dug into my back, then I felt just his rear ones, and then his weight was gone.

I watched as Darwin climbed awkwardly one stage at a time. At the top of the tree, a hole opened in the plaid sky, and Darwin leaped upward into it.

The hole closed.

I waited.

The hole suddenly reopened.

Out tumbled the Pilot, followed by Darwin. They both fell to the ground, landing on the cosmological constant with a solid thud.

I had just a few moments to size up the Pilot.

What I saw was a Neanderthal. A hairy, stocky, pugnacious caveman

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with an overhanging brow and prognathous jaw, an escapee from one of those prehistoric sabertoothskin-rippers.

Then the Pilot was up and running.

Darwin got painfully to his feet.

"Quick! After him!"

We began chasing the surprisingly speedy bandy-legged Pilot. Innumerable smerps scattered left and right out of our path, causing who-knew-what havoc back in the real universe.

As we ran, I managed to gasp, "How—how did *he* ever get into the oververse?"

A moderate gallop was no impediment to Darwin's lecturing abilities. "The ingredients of our travel cocktail are all found naturally on Earth. And I suspect that the sensorium alterations one would experience amid dimly lit cave paintings would be a crude substitute for our biomimetic circuitry—"

"How—how has he lived all these millennia?"

"He appears to eat smerps. I've found gnawed bones. . . ."

"Yuck!"

The Pilot was plainly loping toward a certain tree.

"We can't let him reach *that* one!" yelled Darwin. "It's the tree for 'planet-busting rogue asteroids'!"

Darwin sped up and cut the Pilot off from his goal. The caveman who was the only God our world had ever known gave an apelike howl of frustration and changed course.

I found myself tiring. This chase couldn't go on all day. How long could we keep the Pilot away from any and every tree? Sooner or later, with his superior knowledge of the oververse, he was bound to outmaneuver us, getting free to cause unthinkable chaos.

Darwin must have realized the same thing. He put on a final burst of speed, catching up with the fleeing Pilot and butting the legs out from under him.

The Pilot rolled head over heels through a flock of olive-green smerps. And when he regained his feet, he was clutching two of them, one in each gnarly hand.

"Oh boy," said Darwin resignedly.

"What, what? Who's he holding?"

"It's *us*. Those are the smerps from which Darwin and Burnett emanate. I identified them the last time I was here."

Before we could do anything, the Pilot had crushed the windpipes of both smerps and tossed them lifeless to the ground.

Darwin pawed the ground. "Now you've gotten me really angry," he announced, then charged.

Me too.

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If you've never seen someone trampled to death by two My Little Ponies, you're a lucky person. It's not a pretty sight.

When we were done licking the Pilot's blood from our hooves, I said, "So, we've saved the world again, Darwin. But this time we died doing it."

"I'm afraid so, Burn. Our bodies back on Earth suffered the same fate as our smerps. But just as the Pilot obviously survived the dissolution of his original cave-bound corpse here in the oververse, so did we."

"And there's no return for us now? We're doomed to inhabit this boring stick-figure landscape?"

"Well, I wouldn't say *that*. . . . "

As Jean later told us, she was really surprised when the asteroid belt in the Overlord's home system rearranged itself to spell out a message from her two college buddies. After all, she hadn't heard from us in over a sidereal year, not counting a hyperspatial birthday card. It was only the work of a few minutes to break out the frozen clones we had given her for safekeeping. (The blank bodies, of course, were represented by two healthy smerps in the oververse.) Old Mr. Goatee unbent enough to loan her his Imperial Subspace Yacht, and Jean showed up on Earth just a few days later. (Darwin and I spent that time in the oververse setting right all the damage the Pilot had recently done, as well as fine-tuning a few cosmic parameters. People should notice the disappearance of sexually transmitted diseases, for instance, real soon.) Naturally, the teleport plate on Darwin's front porch was keyed to Jean also. After she took the rigs off our corpses and put them on the clones, she fed our force-grown, mindless duplicates a small dose of the transport drug—just enough to put them in sync with our manifestations in the oververse—and when it wore off, why, there we *were,* good as new.

"And *just* in *time!*" were Jean's first words to us.

I let Darwin ask why. ●

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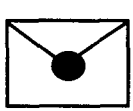

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CURSE OF THE NIGHTMARE-COLLECTOR'S WIFE

He mounts them on the walls,
stows them in the bedroom closet,
leaves them lying here and there about
the house to scare the bejabbers from unwary guests,
to send grave chills horripilating up and down her spine.

Horrid things large and small,
lacquered with the brine of tears,
harmless until you brush against them,
until they begin to reek and roil with the stench of
uncured leather, beached kelp, rusted iron, burning hair.

Until they echo with the screams
of interminable slow-motion chases:
great hairy arthropods scuttling in pursuit,
a plague of disembodied eyes galumphing in pursuit,
a faceless score of savage men wielding poleaxes in pursuit.

Other collectors congregate,
pale and cadaverous chaps like himself,
would-be journeymen of the night who have
come to ooh and aah, to covet his gruesome trophies,
to offer unbelievable sums for a nightmare they would own.

The envy of this skeleton crew,
he basks in their abominable adulation,
yet denies their extravagant offers one and all,
for his is the manic passion of the collector-cum-addict,
a passion that casts the world in shadow on the lightest day.

A compulsion that molds every
twist and turn of their lives together,
a madness that abandons her lonely in her bed,
that floods her once-pastoral dreams with a rampaging
river of horrors she could never have imagined on her own.

—Bruce Boston

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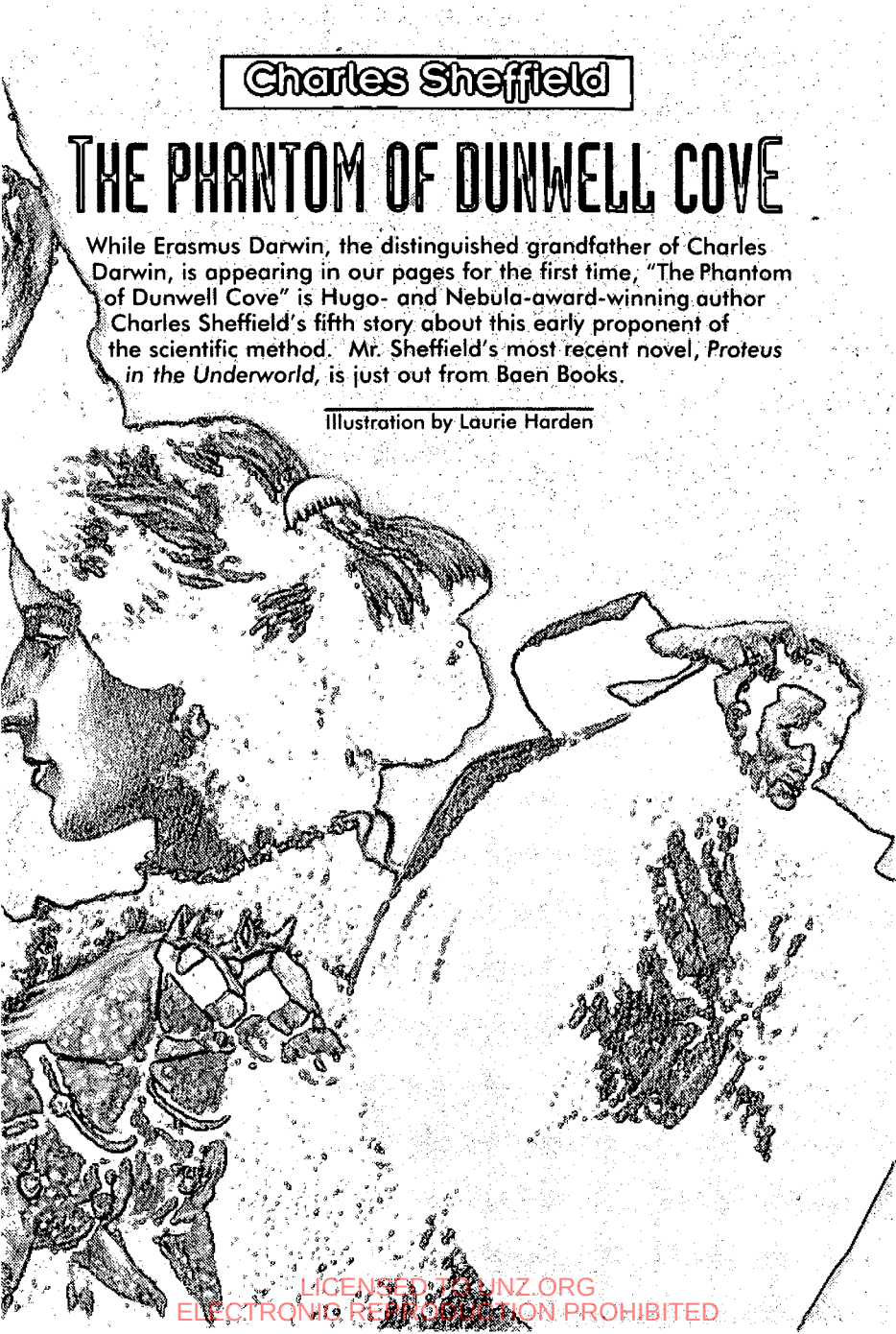
Charles Sheffield

THE PHANTOM OF DUNWELL COVE

While Erasmus Darwin, the distinguished grandfather of Charles Darwin, is appearing in our pages for the first time, "The Phantom of Dunwell Cove" is Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning author Charles Sheffield's fifth story about this early proponent of the scientific method. Mr. Sheffield's most recent novel, *Proteus in the Underworld*, is just out from Baen Books.

Illustration by Laurie Harden



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"Salt ham, bread, *sauerkraut* cabbage, and near two pints of beer to slake the thirst. So what, then, would you expect?"

The speaker seemed to be addressing the question to his own big toe. His bare right foot and broad calf were propped up on a wooden stool in front of him, while he stooped forward to examine the reddened and swollen toe joint. It was no easy task. He was grossly overweight, with an ample belly that hindered bending. The face that frowned down at the offending foot was fat and pock-marked, redeemed only by its good-natured expression and bright grey eyes.

"You would expect exactly what I got," he went on. He was dabbing ether onto the joint, preparatory to covering it with a waiting square of oiled silk. "For have I not told you, Jacob, that the surest way to induce an attack of gout is through the consumption of ill-chosen food and drink? Salt is bad. Beer is bad. Claret and port are pure poison."

The other man in the room took no notice whatsoever. He was prowling between the fireplace, where a good coal fire showed an orange heart, and the narrow shuttered window. He paused to peer out of the crack in the shutter as another gust of wind hit the house, banging on the thick door like a gloved hand.

"Damnable," he muttered. "Down the Pennines, and before that straight from the North Pole. And it's snowing again. We ought to be in warmth and sunshine. What man in his right mind would live in a place like this, when he could head south and enjoy the sun by day, and be lulled to sleep by warm breezes at night?"

"Aye. The south, where an Army colonel could develop malaria, to leave him shaking and shivering three or four times a year, regardless of weather." The square of silk was in position, and the fat man was carefully pulling on over it a woollen stocking. "I have Jesuit-bark in my chest, Jacob, if you need it. It is my professional opinion that you do."

"Later, maybe." Jacob Pole touched his hand to his jacket pocket, then returned to lean on the mantelpiece. He was a tall, gaunt man, with a dark and sallow complexion. Long years of intense sunlight had stamped a permanent frown across his brow, and a slight, continuous tremble in his fingers told of other legacies of foreign climes. "I'm in fair shape, provided that I don't catch a chill. Better shape than you, from the look of it. Salt ham and beer. What prompted you, 'Rasmus, after all your lecturings to me?"

Erasmus Darwin pulled on his soft boot, wincing for a moment as the sore toe felt the touch of leather. "Hunger, Jacob, pure hunger. What else? I was on the road early this morning, in anticipation of the bad weather that you now see. I knew of the childbirth problem at Kings Bromley, but the case of blood poisoning at Rugeley was a surprise and the supplies of food that I had taken with me in the sulky were gone by

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midday. Salt ham and beer were all that were available; yet a working man needs fuel. He cannot afford to starve."

"Be a while before that happens to you." Jacob Pole nodded at Darwin's belly. "And you were right about the weather. It's absolutely foul outside, and it's not even dark yet. I'm wondering."

"Wondering what?" Darwin was smiling knowingly to himself.

"Wondering how I'll ever get home tonight. There's more snow in the sky, and the road to Radburn Hall was hard going even early in the day."

"You should not even think of it." Darwin stood up, pressing his right foot tentatively on the rug. "What sort of host would I be, if I sent a friend out to freeze on a night like this? Moreover, Elizabeth will surely not expect you. Do one thing for me, Jacob, as a favor to my sore toe. Go and tell Miss Parker to set an extra place for dinner."

Another buffet of wind hit the stone walls of the house, but Jacob Pole had lost his gloomy expression when he hurried away toward the kitchen. He was back in just a few seconds.

"Erasmus, she said you already told her that I would be staying to dinner, and that just the two of us should be present."

"And I was wrong?"

"No. But how did you know?"

Darwin was grinning, a friendly grin even though it revealed that he was lacking front teeth. "You arrive at my home while I am away on my rounds. That is unusual, but not unprecedented. You await my return. Very well. But when I come here accompanied by Dr. Withering, you say scarce a word to either of us. And when he goes, you stay. Add to that your touching of your jacket pocket, not once but half a dozen times. Is it not obvious that you have something that you wish to show to me, and say to me, and that it is something calling for privacy?"

"I do, and it does."

"And it is not the delicate matter of a medical opinion."

"How the devil can you know that?"

"Because if it were, you would have spoken long since. You share my high opinion of Dr. Withering."

"Blast it, do you know everything?"

"Very little—until I am told." Darwin led the way through to the dining-room. Earlier there had been a noise of small children, but now the room was empty. Two places were set, facing each other across the broad oak table. In the middle sat earthenware tureens of parsnips, potatoes, and Brussels sprouts, with between them a gigantic steaming pie, twenty inches across and already cut into ten slices. Jugs filled with milk and water stood at the end of the table, along with a concession to the visitor in the form of a pitcher of dark beer.

Jacob Pole sniffed the air. "Squab pie? My favorite."

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"With apples, onions, *and* cloves. But before you assign me powers beyond the natural, I will admit that this was to be my dinner long before I knew you would be here to share it."

Pole pulled an envelope out of his jacket pocket and sat down at the table. "A pie that size. What would you have done if it were just you at table?"

"My v-very best." Darwin's voice took on a slight stammer that came often when he was joking. He had already lifted a mammoth portion of pie onto his plate and was reaching for the tureens. "Now, we are better equipped for conversation. At your service, Jacob."

But the gaunt colonel shook his head. "If you don't mind, I'd like to read a letter aloud to you before I say anything else. The only thing you must know before I begin is that the writer, Millicent Meredith, is my cousin. Milly is a widow, and four years ago I helped her with a family problem. Although we have always been regular correspondents, it is so long since we last met."

Darwin, his mouth already full of pie, reached out for the envelope. It had been opened, sliced cleanly at the top with a sharp letter-opener. He slid out four pages of thick ivory-white paper, written on both sides in purple ink.

He handed the pages to Pole but kept the envelope, examining it carefully before placing it on the table to the left of his plate.

Pole, after a preliminary clearing of his throat, began to read.

Dear Cousin, You have often in the past urged me to follow the advice of your esteemed friend, Dr. Darwin, and to discard supernatural explanations for any event, regardless of appearances—

"She has my ear and sympathy already."

"Aye. I thought that would catch you."

So it is for this reason that I am writing to you now, when my own rational faculties no longer seem able to operate.

First, let me say that the plans for Kathleen's marriage have been proceeding apace, and I trust you have received already the official invitation. Since Brandon Dunwell is eager for the ceremony to follow tradition, and to take place like all Dunwell family marriages at Dunwell Hall, Kathleen and I have decided to remain here in Dunwell Cove until the wedding. Brandon's family, who have already begun to arrive in anticipation of the event, are of course staying at the Hall, but I judge that inappropriate for the bride and her mother.

Kathleen, you will be glad to hear, is in good health, although rather thoughtful in spirits. I hope that this is in contemplation of the major change which is soon to occur in her life, rather than to the events here which so perturb me.

Lest you accuse me of wandering, let me move at once to those events.

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The coach ride from St. Austell to Dunwell Cove is about seven miles, Dunwell Hall being on the direct route to the cove and less than one mile away from it. The coach runs regularly, but only twice a week, and it stops at the Hall as necessary to pick up or discharge passengers. As I understand it, the service has been this way for many years.

Ten days ago, a party of three of Brandon Dunwell's relatives arrived from Bristol. They boarded the coach at St. Austell, and rode in it to Dunwell Hall. When they arrived, they found that each of them had been robbed of their personal valuables, which since they carried jewellery appropriate to a wedding exceeded ten thousand pounds in value. This loss took place in spite of the fact that each of the travelers insists that the coach did not stop anywhere on the journey, nor did anyone enter or alight. The coachman confirms this. Also, since even here in Cornwall the January evenings are often chilly, the coach doors were closed and the window openings all muffled.

That was mystery enough. However, six days ago the episode was repeated identically with the arrival of another couple of Brandon's relatives. The loss in their case included golden brooches and diamond bracelets, removed from the chests and hands of their wearers and of great value. Again, both travelers insist that the coach did not stop, nor did anyone enter or leave the coach, and again this is confirmed by the coachman's own account. It was then that I heard the first whispers around the village of Dunwell Cove: That the phantom who robbed the coach is none other than Brandon's dead brother, Richard, whose spirit haunts Dunwell Hall and the road outside it.

Naturally, any muttering of such a nature is profoundly distressing to Kathleen, who I am sure by now has heard it. The rumors continue to grow, since only last night a third party of travelers was robbed by the phantom. They were traveling as before from St. Austell to Dunwell Hall, and again they were friends and relatives of Brandon Dunwell.

That is the situation as it obtains today. Brandon is sullen and furious, claiming that someone is seeking to ruin the celebration of his marriage. His relatives are equally angry, in their case at the material loss. But if I am honest, the only one for whom I care is Kathleen, and illogical as it seems, she has somehow taken onto herself the blame for the appearance of the phantom. Yet she swears, and she has never yet lied to me, that she has no idea what can be happening.

And so, dear cousin, I am casting my net blind over the ocean of my relatives. I am writing to you, and to certain others whom I trust and who are of wide experience, to ask if you can offer any explanation as to what has been happening on the coach ride between St. Austell and Dunwell Hall. Despite your urge that I remain always skeptical of events beyond Nature, the invisible phantom who haunts the coach appears able

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to perform acts so inexplicable, and yet so tangible, that it is tempting to invoke thaumaturgic causes.

I might add that I myself rode the same coach, four weeks ago when we first came to Dunwell Cove, and again last week when I had need to travel to St. Austell for the purchase of personal materials related to the wedding. Kathleen was not with me, but I was accompanied by a woman cousin of Brandon who is staying at the Hall. Talk of the phantom had made both of us nervous, but we neither saw nor heard anything unusual, either coming or going.

My question, cousin, is simple to ask but difficult to answer: What should I do? My instinct is to postpone the wedding, but on the face of it that is ridiculous. I have not lost one penny because of the phantom's actions. Nor, in fact, have the Dunwell family relatives, since Brandon is insistent on providing to them new articles of jewellery at least as valuable as those that have been lost. Brandon himself is rich enough that such compensation offers no hardship to him whatsoever.

Yet my heart remains troubled and uneasy. My instincts tell me that the phantom must be connected to the wedding, but in some way that I cannot conjecture. As you well know, dear Kathleen is my only daughter. She appears about to make an excellent marriage, to a man who is the sole owner of Dunwell Hall and of all its extensive lands and properties. And yet . . . and yet I know not what.

You once helped me greatly, and I have no right to presume again upon your time and good nature. But any suggestions, or any thoughtful advice that you may be able to offer will be gratefully received by—your loving cousin, Milly.

Pole laid down the final sheet. Across from him his companion did not seem to have moved, but almost half the pie had vanished and the vegetable tureens were much diminished.

Darwin sniffed and shook his bewigged head. "A mystery, sure enough. And a clear cry for help. But I heard nothing that could not have been read aloud in the presence of Dr. Withering."

"True enough. But there is more. And it is more personal to the family." Jacob Pole tapped the letter. "Milly didn't spell it out to me, because she knew that I know all about it, but she has other worries on Kathleen's behalf. You see, two years ago Kathleen was engaged to another Dunwell. That was Richard, Brandon's elder brother. But he stabbed a man to the heart, was tried for it, and sentenced to death. The day before he was due to be executed he broke out of his cell and escaped along the cliffs east of Dunwell Cove. When he was cornered he jumped into the sea rather than be re-captured. Three days later his drowned body was found at low tide, trapped in the rocks and the tidal ponds. Kathleen was of course heart-broken by the murder, the trial, the verdict, and then the

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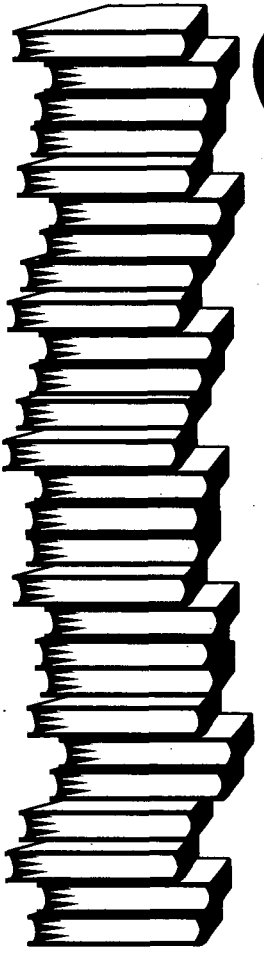

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suicide. So now, when there's talk of a phantom, and people say it's the ghost of dead Richard . . . you can see how poor Milly's thoughts are running."

"She wonders about a ghost, which I can believe in no more than I am persuaded of the existence of a phantom who performs so mundane a function as the robbing of coaches."

"Perhaps." Pole was at last helping himself to food, while conscientiously avoiding Darwin's eye. "But if it's no ghost, then we need another explanation."

"Which in the circumstances is quite impossible to provide." Darwin reached far along the table, to slide within easy reach a round of soft cheese and a bowl of dried plums and candied peel. "Jacob, I love a good mystery as much as the next man, and perhaps a great deal more. But if you have heard me say it once, you have heard me say it a hundred times: In medical analysis, there is no substitute for personal presence. For if medication and surgery form the lever of medicine, examination provided the fulcrum of diagnosis which allows them to act. One must observe at first hand: the jaundiced eye-ball, the purple or livid lips, the sweet or necrotic breath. One must examine the stools and the urine, and palpate the cool or fevered skin. Without that direct evidence, a doctor has nothing but hearsay. And in many ways, the curious events involving your cousin and her daughter are little different. So what, to continue the medical analogy, are the *facies* of the situation? I can list a dozen facts which may be important, and concerning which we know nothing. Without facts to sink them, a thousand ideas can be safely launched. Yet you would propose that we sit here in Lichfield, and conjure an order of events in west Cornwall? I say, that cannot be done with any shred of plausability."

Pole nodded gloomily. "I suppose you're right." He said nothing more, but went on quietly eating. After a few seconds Darwin reached across to pick up the letter and began reading it over.

"When is the wedding?" His words were hardly intelligible through a mouthful of Caerphilly cheese and plums.

"February 12th—ten days from now."

"Hmph. Do you know the bridegroom?"

"Neither him, nor his dead elder brother. In truth, the whole Dunwell family are strangers to me."

"And your niece, Kathleen?"

"I was present at her birth. She deserves the best husband in the world."

"And finally, your cousin Milly. Would you describe her as an imaginative woman, one with an active fancy?"

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"Quite the opposite. She's direct and straightforward, with a bottom of good sense."

"Hmph." The silence this time went on for much longer, until at last Darwin stood up and walked over to the window. He peered out, looking up at the sky. "Ten days, eh? And it is sixteen days to the full moon."

"That's right." Pole was suddenly smiling. "Ample time. It would be four days each way, six at very worst. We would be there and back, and you'd not miss a single meeting of your precious Lunar Society."

"That is as well. Our group is overdue for a meeting with Mr. Priestley, reporting on his latest experiences with dephlogisticated air. All right." Darwin was absent-mindedly wiping greasy hands on the table-cloth. Once the decision had been made he moved at once to practical details. "Let us assume that Dr. Small and Dr. Withering will serve as *locum tenens* in my absence. It will take at least four days to reach Dunwell Cove, but such a timetable presumes that we will be able to obtain a coach to take us to the service running south from Stafford. In such weather, that may not be easy."

"Ah—well, as it happens that's already taken care of. I arranged for a two-house dray to collect me here, first thing in the morning. It has ample room for two."

"Indeed." Darwin raised his eyebrows. "And what of your necessary baggage?"

"It's all with me. You see, I thought that I—"

"Say no more." Darwin raised a plump hand, and leaned far back in his chair. "I now wish to ruminate on the fact that my actions are apparently so easily dictated." He waved at the table, where half the pie remained untouched. "And you must eat, instead of pecking like a sparrow. Come, Jacob, no protests. You know the rule of nature: *Eat or be eaten.* I do not relish the though of a winter traveling companion who is weakened by lack of nourishment."

He scanned the table top, a frown on his face. "And while you do your share, I will inquire as to the status of our hot dessert. Ginger pudding was promised."

The contrast was striking. As far west as Launceston, winter ruled. The road surface was iron-hard and stable, the crust of snow breaking barely enough to give firm support to a horse's hooves. Hedgerows, formed from black tangles of leafless hawthorn, marked the converging lines of highway across the white and rolling landscape of the Bridetown Hills. Finches, robins, and starlings, perched within the hedges, were fluffed out to grey and brown balls of feathers. They did not move as the coach passed by. Within the vehicle the passengers sat just as unmoving,

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swaddled from toes to ears. The interior, no matter how much the occupants might struggle to block each crack and chink of door and window with rags and clothing, remained ice-cold.

But beyond Launceston, the road skirted left of the brooding, craggy mass of Dartmoor. The way to the south lay open. Within a few miles the snow cover melted magically away, while at the same time, as by coincidence, the sun broke through and began to disperse a long-held low overcast. The road surface softened as the coach proceeded, and at last at the foot of the hedges the snowdrops and first yellow crocuses stood in open bloom. Beyond the boundary hedgerows, birds and rabbits busied themselves in the soggy fields.

"By the grace of the great Gulf Stream." Darwin had abandoned the broad hat that had protected his head since leaving Lichfield, and for the past few miles he had been peering out through the coach window at the rapidly changing scenery. "The Stream laps the whole of the western peninsula, to the point where winter in Cornwall and Devon never approaches the severity of our inland experience. A few more miles south, and I swear we will see full spring. But even in Lichfield, we still have reason to be grateful for the Stream's existence. Were it not for that benign presence, all England would be colder than Iceland."

Jacob Pole did no more than grunt. For three days he had said little and eaten less, contenting himself with making the atmosphere in the closed coach hideous with strong tobacco, that he first cut in thin slices from a purple-brown solid block, rubbed well between his hands to shred and flake it, and stuffed into a curved meerschaum pipe so well-used over the years that its golden exterior had turned almost black. He lit his pipe with the aid of a small oil lamp, constantly burning for just that purpose. Smoke rose up in pungent blue-white spirals to fill the closed coach. Darwin, as confined in movement as his companion, had grumbled about the nauseating stink as he scribbled both verse and prose in his bulky Commonplace Book, but between rhymed couplets and engineering ideas he had eaten and drunk enough for two from the hamper that sat next to him on the seat. His precious medical chest, too bulky to travel within, was lashed to the coach's flat top.

"And because it is never true winter in the extreme south-west," Darwin went on, "the native flora must surely contain members of the vegetable kingdom not encountered farther north and east. Think of it, Jacob. I may return home with the basis for a whole new pharmacopeia, derived from plants that I have never seen before."

Another grunt was Pole's main reaction, until at last he removed the pipe from his mouth.

"Blast it, Erasmus, I don't have your spare padding. If you're planning

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to keep up the geography and medical lectures, you might be at least do it with the window closed."

"So that you can once more asphyxiate me with your fumes? You are fortunate that there are no other passengers, less patient and long-suffering than I. Also the day will come when you regret your emaciation." Darwin patted his belly in a satisfied way. "This is not mere padding. It is valuable reserves, against the possible vicissitudes of Nature."

But he pushed the window to, as tightly as it would go, and leaned back in his seat. "Five more minutes, Jacob, and it will be time to dot your pipe and light your brain. That last milepost shows us to be only one mile short of St. Austell."

"I'm aware of that. Why d'ye think I've been sitting here steaming, the past half-day?"

"Are you afraid that your cousin may have alerted others to our impending arrival? I thought that you in your letter were to warn her against such action."

"I did. And I rely on Milly completely. So far as anyone in Dunwell knows we are no more than guests for the wedding party on the bride's side."

"So why the long face?"

"Her reply created that." Pole patted his chest, but made no move to draw a letter from within his quilted and buttoned overcoat. "Too much gratitude, in advance of results. She seems to think we're gods—especially you."

"And why not? We are as much gods as any that exist."

"You don't want to go talking like that around the people at Dunwell Hall. Especially Brandon Dunwell. According to Milly he's a very pious God-fearing man—a bit too much, I suspect, for her taste."

"And therefore far too much for mine."

"No doubt. But the real problem is, I'm afraid Milly is hoping for a lot more than we can deliver. I can tell from her letter, she's thinking we'll arrive at Dunwell Cove with a full explanation. And you told me yourself, you have absolutely no ideas about the phantom."

Darwin's full mouth pursed. "I said no such thing. If you will but recall our conversation on that first evening, I said that I had a thousand ideas. That is still true. But until we arrive at Dunwell I have no sieve, no way to retain truth and riddle away plausible nonsense. But that will change. In fact, it is already changing."

While they were talking, the rhythm of the wheels was taking on a different cadence. The rumble of movement over town cobblestones replaced the crunch of gravel of a well-kept country road.

The coach was arriving, a few minutes earlier than the driver's estimate, at the St. Austell coach-house. The wheels were still turning when

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Darwin opened the door. He swung himself to the ground, lightly for a man of his size, and stared around with eyes gleaming.

They had arrived on a private vehicle, not a regular service, and the only person waiting at the coach-house was a straw-haired boy of nine or ten years old. Seated on a bench, he was enjoying the new-found sun and staring at Darwin with open curiosity.

"A bad start." Pole, climbing out more slowly and gesturing to the driver to unload their cases and the medical chest, glared at the lad. "Nothing here. I was hoping we'd learn something in St. Austell and have as suggestion to offer Milly."

"And so we may. Make no mistake, Jacob, as a witness a young boy is far to be preferred to a grown man or woman. He has fewer *preconceptions* as to what he believes he should see."

Darwin walked across to the lad, who was still gawping at the new arrivals. He reached into his pocket, and fished out a shilling.

"Right, sir." The voice was full of the singing tone of the far West Country, and at the sight of the coin the boy had come to his feet at once. "You'll be wanting me to handle the cases, sir?"

"No. Just answer one or two questions." Darwin sat down on the bench and gestured for the other to do the same. "What's your name?"

"Georgie, sir."

"Well, Georgie, we will be taking the coach from here to Dunwell Cove. Will it be arriving soon?"

"Yes, sir. He be here any time now."

"Is it always the same coach that is used for Dunwell Cove, or are there several?"

"There's only the one. Same coach, and mostly same horses."

"And it is always driven by the same coachman?"

"Yes, sir. Always the same man, it be, for a long time now."

"What is his name?"

"Jack Trelawney." Conflicting expressions ran across the boy's open face. "Stinkin' Jack, some around here be callin' him."

"But it is not a fair name?"

"No, sir. He were once powerfully smelly, a while back. But not now."

"I see. You like Jack, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, that I do." Georgie blushed, a fiery scarlet like a sunburst. "He never thrazzes me for nothing, not like some as drive the coaches." He looked down, then turned to glance up at Darwin through thick eyelashes that any girl might have envied. "He's not being in trouble, is he?"

"No trouble at all, so far as I know. But would you point him out to me when he comes in?" Darwin stood up, dropped the coin into a grubby hand, and was rewarded with a shy smile.

"Yes, sir. I'll point 'im out. Thank'ee, sir."

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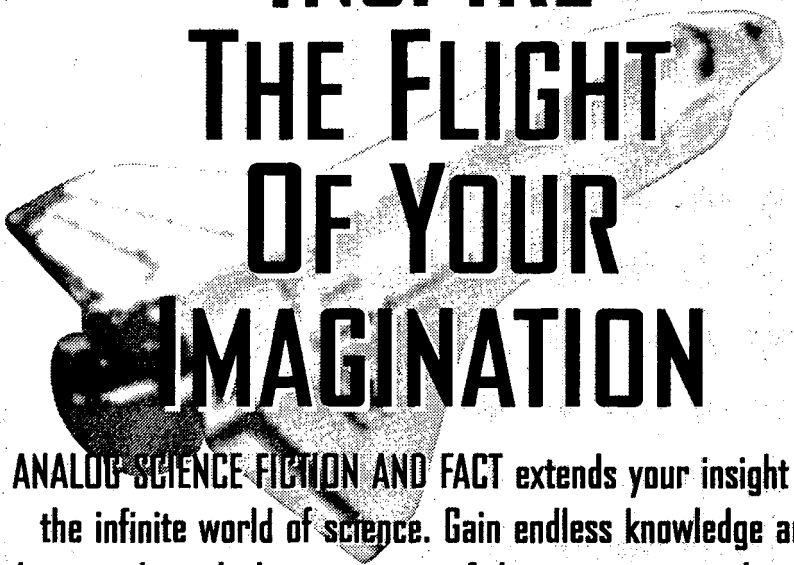

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Pole had watched and listened from over by the coach, which had already been turned and provided with fresh horses in preparation for its journey back to Taunton. "A good shilling down the drain," he grumbled, as Darwin returned to his side. "And we've not been in St. Austell above five minutes."

"But *my* shilling, to spend as I choose." Darwin's voice took on a more thoughtful tone, and he went on, "A shilling spent, not wasted. You see, Jacob, there is a hidden calculus, not recognized yet by our philosophers but perceived instinctively by many financiers. Knowledge is a close relative to money, just as money is related to knowledge."

Pole flopped down to sit on his traveling chest. "Damn it, 'Rasmus, you're getting too deep for me. Money leads to knowledge, eh? So what knowledge did your shilling just buy from yon lad?"

"I do not yet know." Darwin shrugged his heavy shoulders. "As I said, it is not a recognized calculus, and its working rules have still to be established."

"Then for the moment I'll hang on to my shilling." Pole nodded toward the bench, where Georgie was gesturing urgently to Darwin and pointing along the road. "Here's what you got for yours."

Approaching the coach-house on foot was a dark-clad figure holding a leather gun-case. His long overcoat was marked in front with pale brown stains, and he wore a round hat with a rim pulled low to shield his single eye from the bright sun. A black patch covered the other eye, and bushy brows and full black beard emphasized rather than concealed thick lips, red and glistening. The man's complexion was very dark, adding credence to the idea that the remnants of the defeated Armada had two centuries earlier discharged their exhausted Spanish crews onto the Cornish coast. The coachman took in Darwin, Pole, and luggage with one swift glance, nodded a greeting at the boy, and strode on through into the coach-house.

Two minutes later he was back from behind the building, driving a two-horse cabriolet with a modified wooden body. He held the reins lightly and the team was fresh and frisky, but the coach wheeled smartly around to stop precisely at the pile of luggage.

He jumped down from the driver's seat and grinned at his passengers with a rapid gleam of white teeth. "Jack Trelawney, at your service. Dunwell Cove or Lacksworth, sirs? Or are you for Dunwell Hall?"

The voice, like the man's actions, was quick and economical, lacking the Cornwall burr. The brown eyes scanned the two men, head to toe. Without waiting for an answer he bent to hoist the medical chest to the rear of the coach.

"Dunwell Cove. The Anchor Inn." Darwin had done his own share of rapid observation. Jack Trelawney was of medium height and build, but

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he had lofted the heavy chest with no sign of effort. The tendons on the backs of his work-hardened brown hands stood out as he lifted, showing in white contrast to fingers and nails yellow-stained on their end joints as by heavy and prolonged use of tobacco.

"Very well." Trelawney had just as rapidly loaded the other luggage. "We have a light load today, and you are the only passengers. Payment before we start, if you do not mind. Thank you, sirs." He pocketed the money without seeming to look at it and gestured them to board.

"I think maybe a ride in front, with the weather so improved." Darwin moved to stand close to Jack Trelawney, then paused and frowned. "What do you say, Jacob?"

"Not for me. I'm still thawing out."

"Oh, very well. Then I'll keep you company." Darwin swung open the door of the coach and led the way inside. He waited until the door was closed, Trelawney had climbed up front in the driver's seat, and the two-wheeled cabriolet was on the move. Then he was out of his place again.

"Devil take it, 'Rasmus, can't you sit still for a second?" Pole, in the act of taking out pipe and tobacco, was forced to stop, because Darwin was leaning right over him, examining doors and windows. "What are you up to?"

"Looking for a way for the phantom to enter." Grunting with effort, Darwin progressed from ceiling to floor, and was soon on hands and knees peering under the seats.

"For God's sake! If you think the phantom hides away under there, and pops out when nobody's looking. . . ."

"I do not." Darwin, hands and sleeves filthy with cobwebs and old dust, finally climbed back to his feet and dropped into his seat facing Pole. "A modification to the original vehicle, with well-fitting doors and windows. It would please my friend Richard Edgeworth, because it is not of conventional design. But it is soundly made. Be silent for a moment, Jacob. I wish to listen."

Jacob Pole sat, straining his own ears. "I don't hear a thing."

"You do. Listen. That is the squeak of coach bodywork. And all the time there is the clatter of the wheels over hard surface. That snort was one of the horses, hard-breathing."

"Of course I hear *those*. But they are just noises. I mean, there's nothing to *listen to*."

He had lost his audience, because Darwin was up again, this time opening a window. He stuck his head out, peering in all directions.

"The coast road, of course." His bulk filled the opening and his voice sounded muffled. "Typical Cornwall, granite, slate and fieldspar. But St. Austell has reason to be glad of that, for without decomposed feldspar

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there would be no treasure house of china clay. Furze, broom, and scabgrass. Poor soil. And I note lapwings, terns, and an abundance of gulls. Forty yards from road to cliffs, and beyond them a drop to the sea. Very good. And now for the other side." He was across the coach in two steps, to open the window there.

"Are you all right, sir?"

Jack Trelawney's voice, calling from the front of the coach, showed that he had noticed the activity within.

"Perfectly well. Enjoying the scenery and the weather." Darwin stayed for half a minute, then closed the window and slid back to his seat. "Riding ground to the right, we're on the edge of a little moor. More granite, of course, and no sign of people. I doubt that the ground here is very fertile."

"I'll take your word for it." Pole sniffed, and continued stuffing his pipe. "I didn't know you were thinking of setting up farming here, or planting a flower garden. And I'm wondering what you are proposing to tell Milly and Kathleen. They have as little interest as I do in a catalog of local muds and rocks, and still less in the Cornish bestiary."

"I am not proposing, initially, to *tell* anything. It would be premature. I intend first to ask questions. As for an inspection of the surroundings and setting of Dunwell Hall and Dunwell Cove, we are seeking to explain a strange event. And any event, no matter how strange, inhabits a natural environment, which must itself reside within limits set by the physically possible. Therefore, we must first establish those bounding conditions."

"Aye. And after that?"

"After that we will meet the phantom; and, as Shakespeare puts it, 'give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.' "

Darwin's tone was cheerful and confident, but Jacob Pole merely shook his head. The rest of the ride went in silence, one man smoking and the other deep in thought, until the motion of the coach slowed. Jack Trelawney rapped hard on the front of the partition.

"Dunwell Cove. What about the luggage, sir?"

"Place it all inside the inn."

"Aye, aye, sir." In less than a minute Trelawney had bags and medical chest down and within the door of the inn. "Be by tomorrow, about eight of the morning," he said. And then, before Darwin and Pole had time to turn, he was back up onto the foot-board of the coach and rolling away down the road.

"Not one for wasting time," said Pole gruffly. But there was no further chance to comment on Jack Trelawney's departure, because the inn door was opening again, and a woman emerged.

"Cousin!" She ran forward and gave Pole a hearty hug, then turned to

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his companion. "And here is the great Doctor Darwin. Exactly as I imagined you from Jacob's descriptions, but much more handsome."

"And you, madam, are much more beautiful." Darwin offered his hand, at the same time as he gave Pole an accusing side-glance. "I have seldom seen so fair a complexion or so engaging a smile. Indeed, were it not for the color of your hair, I would mistake you for your own daughter, Kathleen."

"Now, sir!" Milly Meredith was fair, short, and plump, with red cheeks and a lively blue eye. She dimpled at the compliment, then shook her head. "Although neither Kathleen nor I is able to smile much at the moment. If you will come inside, I have something new that I must show you."

She led the way. The interior of the Anchor Inn was dim-lit, since the glazed windows were small and the frugal inn-keeper would offer no oil lights until darkness forced it. But the table was set, and at Milly's nod a stout woman in a flowered skirt headed at once for the kitchen.

Milly sat by the window and invited the two men to take seats across from her at the long bench. "Your room is ready upstairs, but I thought that after your long journey you might welcome a meal. I hope that travel has not spoiled your appetite."

"Not in the least." Darwin placed himself opposite Millie. "I am famished, and look forward to dinner with the liveliest anticipation."

"I fear that it will fare less fancy than you are accustomed to. Only Cornish pasties, with potatoes, leaks, pickled onions, and pickled cauliflowers."

"It sounds excellent—and I will not inquire as to what form of meat may be in the pasty. There is an old Cornish saying, madam: 'The Devil will not come into Cornwall, for fear of being made into a pie.' "

Milly Meredith laughed, but Darwin sensed the undercurrent of anxiety within the sound and went on, "Perhaps we can dispose of serious concerns before dinner, ma'am. First, you mentioned that there is something new?"

Milly glanced around before she answered. "New, and most disturbing." She reached into the waistband of her skirt, pulled out a folded piece of yellow paper, and handed it across the table to Darwin. "Two days ago, I discovered this within my sewing kit."

He opened it and read aloud, while Pole leaned across to see the paper. " 'Kathleen must on no account marry Brandon Dunwell. If you value your daughter's health and happiness, make sure the wedding does not take place.' That is all? No other message, no envelope?"

"Nothing."

"And Kathleen?"

"Knows nothing of this. She returns in the morning." Milly drew in a

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deep breath, and her lips trembled. "I have been so tormented, wondering if she should be told."

"Not unless some purpose is served by doing so. I deem it premature to burden her with this. In fact, if it is possible to avoid any involvement of Kathleen in my actions, I will do so." Darwin looked again at the note, and his face became perplexed. "Before this note I had been pursuing a certain line of thinking, which must now perhaps be abandoned. May I keep this?"

"Of course. But Doctor Darwin, what should I *do?* The wedding is in five days, the guests are arriving, the plans proceeding. Brandon is arriving later today, to discuss more arrangements with me."

"What time do you expect him?"

"Soon." She glanced out of the window. "Before dark. He has an aversion to the night. But before he comes, may we talk? Doctor Darwin, I am desperate, and desperately worried, Jacob assures me that you are the most learned man in the whole of Europe, and the wisest. Tell me what I must do, and I promise that I will follow your advice."

"Until I have had the opportunity for more thought concerning this new missive, I am not sure that I am equipped to offer advice. But let me hold for the moment to my original idea. Let us consider the phantom. I realize that you were not visited by that phenomenon in your own journeys from St. Austell, but I would like you to think hard, and to recall the circumstances in which the robberies took place. What can you tell me of each, beyond what you described to Jacob in your letter?"

"I will try." Milly sat for a moment, her rounded forehead broken by frown lines. "January 15th, the first occasion. The coach left St. Austell about five, just as dark came on, and reached Dunwell Hall a little before seven. The evening was clear and cold, and we had been wondering if it would snow, which it did not. But the second and third times were very different. On January 23rd we had an absolute deluge of rain, and the coach arrived in mid-afternoon with all the luggage soaked. The passengers also complained of being slightly wet, but their main concern was with the loss of their valuables. And on January 26th, the last appearance of the phantom, the weather was a cold, ugly fog, and the day hardly seemed to become light from morning to night. The coach again arrived at Dunwell Hall in mid-afternoon. And its occupants had again been robbed."

"Strange indeed. Do you know, had they enjoyed a meal while on the coach? Or perhaps shortly before leaving St. Austell."

"I am sure that the last group at least did not. When they arrived here they were in high good humor, except that they pronounced themselves famished to the point where hunger was making them positively queasy."

"Indeed?" Darwin raised his eyebrows and shook his head. "No food or

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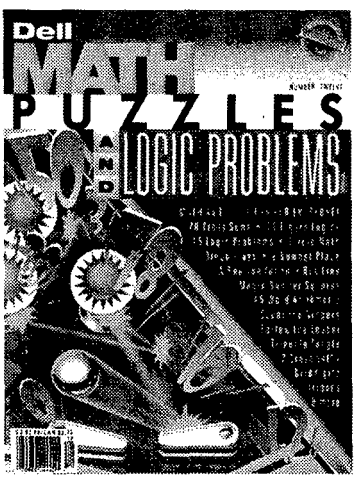

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drink. Then I must think again, and set another notion in train. Is there any other circumstance that you deem worthy of mention?"

"Not really. I was not actually present on those coach journeys, you see, and everything was related to me *secundus* rather than *primus*. But all agree, the coach did not stop. Nor did anyone enter it. I am sorry, but that is all I can tell you."

"Sorry? For what?" Darwin was anything but displeased. "If only my patients described their symptoms with such brevity and clarity, the practice of medicine would be a good deal easier."

The food was at last arriving, and Darwin halted his questioning while it was being served. Jacob Pole and Milly Meredith chatted, catching up on family matters, while Darwin ate heartily, stared at nothing, and from time to time looked again at the note in front of him.

"Health and happiness," he muttered at last. "No food or drink. Happiness *and* health. How strange. Mrs. Meredith, I would very much like to meet Brandon Dunwell, even if only for a few moments. Could you perhaps introduce me, as a friend of yours?"

"Doctor Darwin, Jacob has told me so much of you, I consider you as such a friend."

"Then you must call me Erasmus, not Doctor Darwin. And you should begin doing so at once. It must appear natural by the time that Brandon Dunwell arrives."

"Very well. Erasmus." Milly glanced from him to Jacob Pole and back. Her cheeks turned a brighter pink. "There is one problem. You are not on the list of guests for the wedding. Brandon would accept your presence the more readily if he thought—if we were to somehow suggest—that you were here for other reasons. That you had come, perhaps, because you and I—"

"Say no more. He will learn that I am interested in Millicent Meredith, as any sensible man would be interested."

"And you must call me Milly."

"I already think of you that way." Darwin bowed gallantly, as far as his girth and the table top permitted. "Milly, if it will not disturb your meal, I would like to ask a question or two concerning friend Brandon. He seems to keep curious hours. Do you happen to know why he pursues activities only in the daytime?"

"I have no idea, but it was not always so. Brandon today is sober, quiet, and serious. Years ago, from what I have heard, it was very different. He indulged in gambling, and drinking, and hard living, and was out to all hours."

"But you are sure that he has abandoned that style of living?"

"Quite sure. I would not normally have mentioned his earlier actions at all, since they are so inconsistent with his behavior today."

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"You were right to do so. I compliment you. It is a rare intelligence, Milly, who answers what a man *means,* rather than what he asks." Darwin cocked his head at a sound from outside. "Is that a horse?"

"Brandon, for a certainty. I recognize the harness bells." Milly stared about her. "Doctor—Erasmus—I hope I do not betray your interests. I am new to deception."

Darwin reached across and gripped her hand in his. "It is like sin, Milly. Improvement comes rapidly with practice." He deliberately held on, until the door opened and a newcomer stood at the threshold, a brown basset hound at his side. The dog sniffed at Darwin's luggage, still standing just inside the entrance, and wagged its tail.

"Sit, Harvey." The man waited until the dog sank to its belly, then propelled himself into the room with an almost spasmodic surge of energy. His heels clattered on the floor, as though he was deliberately stamping them. Milly Meredith sprang to her feet with a matching urgency.

"Brandon, this is my friend, Erasmus Darwin." Her blush could have come equally well from embarrassment or knowledge of deception. "He will be staying here for a few days."

But Brandon Dunwell showed little interest in Darwin. He nodded a greeting, blinking pale, tired eyes, and moved at once to the window. He leaned forward toward Milly, gripping the edge of the table.

"Kathleen has not yet returned?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Good. For her sake, I would like to discuss certain financial arrangements for the wedding without her presence." He paused, and stared pointedly at Darwin and Pole.

Darwin nodded reassuringly at Milly Meredith. "Our journey here was a long one. If you will excuse us, Milly, Jacob and I will retire. We need rest."

He led the way, off up the curving wooden staircase. He and Pole were sharing a room under the eaves with two beds. Between them stood a dresser bearing a large bowl and a jug of water. Darwin went across and drank directly from the pitcher, then sat heavily on one of the beds. He pulled out the yellow paper and stared at it.

"Pox on this, 'Rasmus." Jacob Pole was over by the window, prowling the bare boards. "I'm sorry. I bring you here for one mystery, and Milly hits you with another before you're halfway in the front door."

"This, you mean?" Darwin tapped the paper. "It will help, Jacob, not hinder. There is surely one mystery underlying all events, and a concatenation of strange events reduces the possibilities."

"You mean you know what this is all about?"

But Darwin merely sniffed and puffed out his cheeks. He was silent

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for a long time, until finally Pole said, "Well, if you're going to sit in a stupor I'd better have the cases brought up."

He was absent for maybe five minutes, and returned with two servants from the inn. Between them they were carrying the bags and medical chest, and Milly Meredith followed close behind.

"He's gone," she said, "if you want to come down."

Darwin shook his head. "I was not deceiving Brandon Dunwell when I said I was in need of rest. Also, I must have time to think. Before that, however, I would like to ask you a few questions. Please bear with me. Some you may feel are tedious and pointless, and some will be extremely personal."

"Personal?" Milly blushed, but her gaze did not waver. "Ask me anything. And I will tell you everything I can."

"Then I will not stand on ceremony. Do you like Brandon Dunwell?"

Milly looked miserably at Jacob Pole, who shook his head. "The truth, Milly. No weasel words. You can trust Erasmus as you would me."

She drew in a shuddering breath. "I know, Doctor Darwin—Erasmus—I dislike him. And yet I dislike *myself* for disliking him. He has been so good to Kathleen, and he is so clearly fond of her. Perhaps too fond, to the point of obsession."

"And she?"

"That is much more difficult. She says nothing. But sometimes I wonder if she is marrying him for my sake."

"I gather that he is extremely wealthy. While your own situation is—what?"

"You shame me. I am of good family, but Kathleen and I are poor. As you may have deduced, Brandon will bear the bulk of the wedding costs, even though by tradition that falls to the family of the bride. You see, by every rational standard this is a most excellent marriage for Kathleen."

"Do not despise yourself for that. There is no virtue or vice in poverty. But now I must proceed to an even more delicate matter."

"I cannot imagine one. But I will answer whatever I can."

Darwin turned to Pole. "I wish to warn you, too, Jacob, before you respond with outrage to my question. But this is vital information. Milly, is it possible that Kathleen and Brandon Dunwell have in certain matters anticipated their marriage vows?"

Jacob Pole grunted, while Milly Meredith turned fiery red. "I understand." She looked down at the wooden boards. "Even a mother cannot be completely sure. But unless Kathleen is lying to me, and unless my own instincts are also totally wrong—she and Brandon have not."

"And anyone else? Is Kathleen *virgo intacta?*"

"That is my belief."

"Thank you," Darwin nodded in satisfaction. "Kathleen is lucky to have

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you for her mother. Let me move on to what I trust will be less delicate ground. Since you have known him, has Brandon Dunwell ever been away for an extended period?"

"About a year ago, he was absent from Dunwell Hall for several weeks."

"Do you know where he went?"

"I understood that it was to London."

"The great center of everything—including disease. That makes excellent sense, though it proves little. By that time, of course, his brother Richard had been arrested."

"Arrested for the murder of Walter Fowler, convicted, and dead, over a year before."

"And you knew Richard, also?"

"Very well." Milly sat down abruptly on one of the beds.

"And did you like him?"

She stared hard at Darwin. "I have never before said this to anyone, and I beg you not to repeat it—particularly to Kathleen. But until I learned that Richard was a murderer, I far preferred him to Brandon. Even though he was deemed odd by the staff at Dunwell Hall."

"Define, if you can, that oddity."

"They say that in spite of his family's wealth, he had no interest in managing the estate. He was trained as a physician, but chose not to practice. He spent many hours alone, engaged in strange pastimes. He had eccentric friends and visitors, many of them from the Continent, who with Richard dabbled in what the servants at Dunwell Hall judged to be black arts."

"I gather you do not agree with their assessment?"

"No. It is his brother, Brandon, who believes in portents, demons, and magical effects. Richard was a skeptic. But at the same time he was rash and impractical, and except for his odd friends he seemed to prefer animals to people."

"And yet he wooed and won your daughter."

Milly smiled sadly. "Say, rather, that she wooed him. I remember, they met at the Bodmin Goose Fair, and that night Kathleen would talk of nothing else. She said she had looked into Richard's eyes, and seen his soul. His arrest and then his death, only three months later, broke her heart."

"A true tragedy. For everyone." Darwin spoke softly, and placed his hand on Milly Meredith's arm. "One more question, if you permit it, and then I will cease. I can see that this memory distresses you."

"I will not deny it. But you came here to help me, and I must do my part. Ask on."

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"Richard Dunwell killed a man, Walter Fowler. It seems out of character with what you have said of him."

"Certain events would drive him to anger, almost to madness. The man had apparently been beating a lame dog. It was later discovered dying, and its master, Walter Fowler, dead."

"But surely, if Dunwell had explained the sequence of events. . . ."

"He attempted concealment. Fowler's body had been dragged away and hidden in the gorse bushes. Richard's monogrammed knife, marked with blood, was buried close by." Milly answered. "A servant found Richard's clothes, also stained with blood, in his rooms at the hall. Erasmus, if you please—"

"I understand. You have been more than helpful, and we will talk of this no more." Darwin sank onto the bed, his fat face thoughtful and his eyes suddenly far away. "You have given me enough to think about. More than enough. With your leave, I will turn this over in my mind. And then we will see what tomorrow may bring. I would appreciate one other thing before you retire: a general map of Dunwell Hall."

"The interior?"

"That, if you are able to provide it. But most important, I need the location of the kennels."

The next morning was brisk, with a damp and gusting west wind. When dawn broke Darwin was already fully-dressed and standing at the window. Behind him Jacob Pole was sitting up in bed, coughing and spitting.

"Damn it, 'Rasmus, to wake a man in the middle of the night, when his blood's as thin as water and his guts are—"

"There is hot tea on the dresser. I permitted you to sleep as long as possible."

"Aye. And woke me when I was in the middle of the best dream I've had in a twelvemonth, me in my uniform and Middletown aflame—"

"I need your help, Jacob. Urgently. I have a pony and trap ready, and in five minutes I must be on my way."

Pole was out of bed at once, nightshirt flapping around his thin legs. "Where the devil are my clothes? Are you after the phantom? Do you want me to come with you?"

"Not on my first trip, which will be a short one. But when I return, half an hour from now, I would greatly value your presence."

"I'll be ready. So will your breakfast."

It was closer to an hour when the pony came clip-clopping back to the Anchor Inn. Jacob Pole, standing outside with his overcoat on and his head muffled by a scarf, stared at what was sitting next to Darwin.

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"Christ. Is that what's-its-name?"

"Harvey."

"You stole Dunwell's dog!"

"Borrowed him. Come aboard, Jacob."

"Hold on a second. The food hamper. It's keeping warm." Pole hurried inside, reappeared in a few seconds, and climbed into the trap next to the dog, which sniffed at the laden wicker basket and wagged its tail. "Get your nose out of that! 'Rasmus, you're going to have competition."

"He's entitled to a share. If I am right, he has as much a task to perform as we do."

"Well, he may know what you're up to, but I don't. Come on, man. I'm damned if I'll be more in the dark than a dog."

"If you would but be quiet for a few moments, Jacob, all with be made clear." Darwin shook the reins, and the trap started forward. "Listen . . ."

The ride from Dunwell Cove to St. Austell took less than forty-five minutes. By the end of that time the hamper was nearly empty, the basset hound was gnawing on a meaty ham bone, and Jacob Pole was shaking his head dubiously.

"I don't know. You've added two and two and made twenty."

"No. I have subtracted two and two, and made zero. There is no other possible explanation that fits all we know and have heard."

"And if you're wrong?"

"We will think again. At the very least, this experiment can do no harm."

They were approaching the coach-house. It stood even quieter than the previous afternoon.

"There's nobody here."

"Patience, Jacob. There will be, very shortly, if Jack Trelawney is to make good on his word and be at Dunwell Cove by eight. You stay in the trap, and call him this way when he appears." Darwin climbed down holding the dog by its leather collar. He stood so that they were shielded from the road by the trap itself. The only sound was the panting of the basset hound.

"Coming now," said Pole in a gruff whisper, after another five minutes had passed. And then, at full voice, "Mr. Trelawney! Will you be making the run to Dunwell Cove this morning?"

"Aye, sir. If you can wait ten minutes. You'll be going?"

Darwin stood motionless, as the sound of booted feet came steadily closer. Finally he released his hold on the dog, and stepped around the trap.

The basset hound was already moving. It raced across to Trelawney and gamboled around him, tail wagging back and forth like a flail. Trelawney, after the first futile effort to push the dog away, allowed it to jump up and push its nose at his face.

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"You see, Mr. Trelawney," Darwin said quietly, "a man can stain his complexion to a darker hue. He can disguise his eyes with false eyebrows and a patch. He can redden and thicken his lips with cochineal, or other coloring matter. He can even change his stance and his voice. But it is as hard for a man to change his *smell,* as it is to persuade a dog to adopt a new name."

Trelawney stood perfectly still. The single brown eye beneath its bushy brows stared at Darwin for a moment, then looked away along the road.

"Flee, if you will." Darwin gestured to Pole. "Neither my companion nor I are in any condition to catch you. But do you wish to spend your whole life running?"

"I may not run. Not so long as Kathleen Meredith plans to marry Brandon Dunwell." The dark face twisted in anguish. "It is no matter of jealousy, sir, or of simple envy. It is a matter of—I cannot say what."

"Of your loyalty to Brandon? But you do not need to say it, sir, for I can give you your second opinion *statim.* I saw it the moment that he made his entrance to the Anchor Inn."

"You know!"

"The stamping on the ground, as though his feet are padded and cannot feel it beneath them. The loss of balance in the darkness, which forces him to shun unlit rooms and go out only during the daylight. The need to grip an object whenever possible, so as to remain steady. These are the clear symptoms of *tabes dorsalis.* Brandon Dunwell is paying a high price for his wild early years. He is suffering from syphilis, in its advanced state of *locomotor ataxia.*"

"And Kathleen . . ."

"Is healthy. He must not marry her, or any woman. And I will make sure of that."

The other man sighed, and the muscles of his face relaxed. "Then that is all I care about. For the rest, I am in your hands. How much do you know?"

"I know little, but I suspect a great deal and wish to propose even more. For instance, I guessed last night that this must have been your basset hound. Who but a student of medicine, as you were, would name his dog *Harvey,* after the immortal William Harvey, discoverer of the circulation of the blood? Your brother might take your dog, but he could not change its name. And who but a student of medicine might have ready access to a corpse, when one was needed to inhibit further pursuit? Even before that, I wondered at an incongruity. You were known, I was told, as *Stinking Jack.* But I deliberately moved close to you yesterday, and detected no odor."

"When I had reason to go to Dunwell Hall, I did my best to offer Harvey a false scent. I succeeded, but apparently at some slight cost in

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reputation." Trelawney pushed the eye patch up onto his forehead. His brown eyes were clear and resigned. "Very well, I admit it. I am Richard Dunwell. Although you are apparently a perspective physician, you are not a magistrate. Do you intend to arrest me? If not, what do you propose?"

"I have definite plans. How permanent is the stain of your skin?"

"It can be removed with turpentine. The glued eyebrows may be more difficult."

"But scissors would reduce them. The three of us must join in serious discussion—inside the coach-house. I do not wish to be observed."

Before marrying a woman, look at her mother.

But the maxim worked poorly with Kathleen and Milly Meredith. Standing together outside the Anchor Inn in the pale light of a cold, overcast noon, the two women formed a study in contrasts: Milly fair, short, and dimpled, with the peaches-and-cram complexion of a milkmaid; her daughter tall and sway-backed, stately as a galleon in light airs, high cheekboned, gypsy-dark, and with flashing black eyes.

And yet, Darwin thought, admiring them from his hiding place, perhaps the old rule was not so wrong after all. Both women would be very easy to fall in love with. Certainly there was no mistaking the adoration on Brandon Dunwell's face, as he helped Kathleen to board the coach and climbed in after her. The two sat side by side, and Kathleen waved to her mother before Milly went back into the inn. Kathleen closed the window. The cabriolet, with Jacob Pole driving, rolled off at a moderate pace along the road to St. Austell.

One minute later Darwin was inside the inn stable and climbing up on horseback. He did not look too comfortable there. As the cabriolet vanished from view, a second man holding a horse by the reins ran toward him from the rear of the stable.

His thin-featured face had the unnatural pallor of a man who has just shaved off a dense beard. Brown eyes beneath cropped black eyebrows seemed worried and perplexed.

The transformed Richard Dunwell swung quickly up into the saddle. "We must hurry!"

Darwin did not release the reins of the other horse. "On the contrary, we must not."

"But Colonel Pole—"

"Knows exactly what he has to do, and is thoroughly reliable. We will follow, but cautiously. If we were to be observed by Kathleen, or by your brother, our plans would become worthless."

He started his horse along the deserted road that led toward St. Austell.

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"Kathleen still knows nothing?" Richard Dunwell came forward to ride two abreast.

"Nothing. I wish that it had been possible to take her and Milly into my confidence, but I fear their inability to dissemble. Patience, my friend. Play your part correctly, and soon all need for dissimulation will vanish."

"God grant." Richard Dunwell rode on, his face grim. As they rounded every turn, or breasted a hill, his eyes were constantly scanning the road ahead. At last he gave a little cry and urged his horse to a gallop. The cabriolet was visible a quarter of a mile in front of them, with Jacob Pole dismounted from the driver's seat and standing in the road beside the coach.

Darwin followed at a more leisurely pace. When he came to the cabriolet a door was already open. Richard Dunwell, with infinite tenderness, was lifting from within the coach the unconscious body of Kathleen Meredith. He sank to his knees, holding her and staring hungrily at her silent face.

"Not now, man." Darwin swung himself off the horse's back. "You have other duties to perform. Fulfill them well, and you will have a whole lifetime to gaze upon that countenance. But hurry!"

Richard Dunwell nodded, and laid Kathleen gently on the ground, with Darwin supporting her head. "You will explain?"

"Everything, as soon as she wakens." Darwin passed across to Richard a gallon jar. "Seawater, with a little wornwood and *asafoetida* mixed in. Disgusting, but necessary. Now—go! Jacob is waiting, and you have little time to prepare."

The other man nodded, but he received scarcely a glance as he headed for the waiting coach. When it rumbled away Darwin's attention was all on Kathleen. Soon he detected a change in her breathing.

Just in time! The creak of coach wheels was still audible when her eyelids trembled. He held the *sal volatile* vial of ammoniac water under her nose, and leaned close as her eyes fluttered open to show their whites.

"Do not be afraid, Kathleen." He spoke slowly and clearly. "I am a good friend of your mother and of your uncle, Jacob Pole. You are in no danger."

Her lustrous dark eyes rolled down to focus on the fat, amiable face close to hers.

"What are you?" The words were hardly a whisper.

"I am Erasmus Darwin. I am a physician."

"Brandon—"

"Is not here."

"But just a second ago he was holding my hand—in the coach—" She lifted her head and her gaze roamed over the coast road and deserted cliff. "And now—"

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"I know." Darwin lifted her to her feet and watched to make sure that she stood steady. "That is very good. I have much to tell you, and I believe that you will find it all welcome news. But first, as soon as you are clear-headed, one other unpleasant act must be completed. When you are ready, you and I will ride a little way together. The horses are waiting."

Even at noon the air was chilly, made more so by a cutting wind from the see. Brandon Dunwell had closed the windows tight, but still he felt chilled. He held Kathleen's hand, yawned, and shivered a little. Someone was walking on his grave. Even the hand gripped in his suddenly felt damp and clammy.

He turned to look at her, and flinched back in horror. Kathleen had vanished. Instead he was holding the hand of a *man,* a pale-faced figure whose damp hair flopped lank on his forehead and whose dark, wet clothes clung to his body like cerements.

The man gave him a death's-head smile that showed blackened teeth. "Greetings, brother."

Brandon gasped. "Richard!" He dropped the cold hand and shrank back against the side of the coach.

"Richard, indeed. But a condemned murderer. Even in the grave I cannot rest." The apparition inched a little closer. "Neither I nor you will ever find rest, brother—unless you confess."

"No! I did nothing. Don't touch me!" A pale hand was lifting clawlike fingers toward Brandon's face. Wafting from it came a dank, rotting odor that made him want to vomit.

"Nothing?" The hand paused, inches from Brandon's cheek. Water dripped from the loose sleeve. "You call the murder of Walter Fowler nothing? I bring you his greetings . . . and his accusation."

"It was not my doing." Brandon's breath came in great, sobbing gasps. "I mean, it happened but it was not my fault. Ask Fowler. It was an accident—an argument. I didn't mean him to die." His voice rose to a scream. "Please, for God's sake, don't touch me!"

"One embrace, Brandon. Surely you would not deny that, to a loving brother, when we have been separated for so long? Except that where I dwell now, there is neither time nor place." The sudden figure squelched closer along the coach seat. "Come, one kiss of memories. Even if you refuse to confess, you are still the little brother of whom I was always so fond and protective."

Richard Dunwell lifted his arms and opened them wide. Brandon gave a squeak of terror and wriggled away. He opened the door of the moving coach and tumbled out headfirst. But he did not seem to be hurt, and in

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another moment he was on his feet and heading at a blind, staggering run away from the road toward a dip in the cliffs on the seaward side.

Richard Dunwell waited for the coach to stop before he stepped down. Almost as unsteady on his feet as Brandon, he moved around to where Jacob Pole sat in the driver's seat. "You heard?"

"Every word." Pole's voice was gruff. "His admission is partial, but more than enough."

"He says it was an accident." Dunwell's tone showed how much he wanted to believe that, but Pole shook his head.

"Think what came after. Your knife, marked with blood. Bloodstained clothes in your rooms at Dunwell Hall. That speaks of preparation, not accident. And afterward, silence from Brandon. Even when his own brother stood at the gallows' foot."

Richard shivered, and it was more than wind cutting through wet clothes. "You force me to accept what I would rather deny. But he is still my brother. I would not see him hanged. What now?"

Pole nodded to the two horses approaching the coach. "I cannot say. However, Doctor Darwin is never without one plan—or a dozen."

Those plans had to wait a few moments longer. Richard Dunwell helped Kathleen to dismount from her horse, then the pair stood stock-still and hesitant in the biting sea-breeze. Neither seemed able to speak. Finally she wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"Ah, I should have mentioned that," said Darwin. He at least seemed cheerful. "That stench is by deliberate design—and temporary."

The trance was broken. Kathleen shook her head and smiled. "I don't care if he smells like the grave." And she added, in a low tone intended for Richard alone, "So long as you are not in it."

"And will not be, I trust, for a long time." Darwin came forward, forcing them apart.

"But *how*?" Kathleen glanced from Richard to the coach. "The murder and confession I understand, but the thefts—"

"Patience, Miss Kathleen. There will be time enough for answers—in a little while." Darwin faced Richard Dunwell. "He has to be followed, and at once. You, or I?"

"It should be me." Dunwell glanced away along the deserted cliffs, following the line that his brother had taken. "But I must know one thing before I go. Was it pure avarice, the simple desire to assume the family estate, that made Brandon act so?"

"It was not." Darwin took Richard Dunwell's hand in his. "And the very fact that you feel obliged to ask that question tells me that you cannot be the person to pursue him, lest you stand a second time accused of murder—and this one no forgery of jealousy. Brandon is to be pitied, yet it is not a pity that you can be expected to feel. He coveted something

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that you had; a thing to be found in a lady's eyes, not measured in gold or rubies or family holdings." He lifted Kathleen's hand, and joined it to Richard's. "Go back to the inn with Jacob. Leave the horses here. If I do not return within two hours, you may assume that I am . . . in need of assistance."

Darwin set out along the cliff. He did not look back, but he scanned the grey skyline and every bare rock and tufted mound ahead. Bad weather was on its way. The low cloud layer had descended further, and a patchy sea-rack was blowing ashore with the wind. The shore at the foot of the cliffs was a jumble of white waves, black slate outcroppings and tidal pools, among which wandered forlorn sea-birds. Even Darwin's rational eye could easily populate that desolate scene with the unquiet ghosts of drowned mariners. To Brandon Dunwell's superstitious mind, the sudden appearance of his brother close to the point where he had jumped to his death must have been sheer horror.

Brandon's physical condition had not allowed him to run far. Darwin came across him slumped on a shelf of rock at the very edge of the cliff. He was leaning far forward with his head in his hands and his eyes covered. He did not hear Darwin's approach, and gave a great shuddering jerk when a hand gripped his shoulder.

"Courage, man." Darwin spoke softly. Brandon seemed too terrified to look around. "What you saw in the coach was no apparition from beyond the veil. Your brother Richard is alive. He presented himself so only to force confession—which you gave."

Brandon lifted his head and shook it wearily. But he was beyond denial, and after a few seconds he slumped back to his original position. "Richard is alive. Then I am dead." And his toneless voice was that of a dead man.

"Only if you choose it so." Darwin became brisk and businesslike. "You are a very sick man. But although you cannot be cured, you can be treated. And if I cannot offer you health, I can offer you hope."

"Hope." Dunwell glared up at Darwin, and his tired, red-rimmed eyes showed his despair and exhaustion. "Hope to live long enough to dance on air. Better to go here, and now."

"That is your choice." But Darwin took a firm grasp of the back of Dunwell's jacket as he sat down next to him on the cliff-edge of black rock. "You should know, however, that your brother is not a man to seek vengeance."

"Walter Fowler—"

"Is in his grave. He will not come forth from it, no matter what we do. Naturally, Richard must assume his estate again, and establish his innocence. But a signed letter from you, before your 'escape' and departure forever from these parts—"

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"Sick and penniless."

"You know your brother better than I do. Would he send you forth even now, after all that you have done to him, to wither and die a pauper?"

Brandon said nothing, but he shook his head and stared into the blowing fog.

Darwin nodded. "You have money on your person? Then take one of the horses waiting along the road, and go to the Posthouse Inn at St. Austell. I will plead on your behalf with Richard, and come to you tomorrow. With writing materials."

Brandon Dunwell nodded. He took a deep breath and stood up. Darwin watched him closely until he had backed well away from the cliff and was turning to face inland.

"I will do as you say." Dunwell's pale eyes stared into Darwin's bright grey ones. "But one thing I cannot understand. Why are you willing to do this for me? I am a murderer, and worse."

"Because I took looked once upon a woman's face, and was lost." Darwin's eyes took on their own emptiness. "I believe I would have done anything—*anything*, no matter how terrible—to win her."

"She went to another?"

"At last. But I was fortunate. I won Mary, and was saved from my worst self. Seven years ago, she died." Darwin gave a strange shiver and a shrug of his heavy shoulders. "Seven years. But at last I learned that life went on. As yours will go on."

A fine rain had begun to fall. Neither man spoke as they walked slowly, side-by-side, toward the waiting horses.

It might have been a time for celebration, but the evening mood at the Anchor Inn was far from boisterous. Milly Meredith and her guests, at Darwin's request, had been permitted the use of a private room at the rear of the building. The loud, cheerful voices from the front parlor and the clatter of dishes in the kitchen only added to the feeling of restraint at the long table.

Richard Dunwell sat by the wall across from Kathleen. He had thoroughly bathed, so that no trace of graveyard stench clung to him, and he had scrubbed his blackened teeth to their usual white. Borrowed trousers and jacket from Jacob Pole were a little too long, covering his hands beyond the wrist. He seemed in no mood for food or speech, but sat with the basset hound Harvey at his feet, following Kathleen's every move.

Darwin was next to him, facing Milly, with Jacob Pole beside Darwin at the end of the table and providing the principal interface with the kitchen. A steady supply of food and drink appeared according to Pole's command, the bulk of it despatched by Darwin alone, who had recovered

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his spirits and seemed exempt from the subdued, uneasy air that possessed the others.

"I saw, but did not understand," he said. "When 'Jack Trelawney' appeared on the scene I noticed at once his yellow fingertips and nails. I assumed they were stained from habitual use of tobacco. But there was never a sign of a pipe, and he neither smoked nor chewed." He turned to Dunwell. "According to the servants at Dunwell Hall, you spent many hours alone engaged in strange pastimes. You had eccentric friends and visitors from the Continent, and dabbled in 'black arts.' Now what, to a servant, is a blacker art than alchemy? Those are acid stains on your fingers, are they not?—the result of alchemic experiments."

Richard Dunwell nodded. "Performed also during my time in France, and again here. Contact with nuriatic acid, and slow to fade."

"I have seen them a dozen times on the fingers of our friend, Mr. Priestley." Darwin shook his head in self-criticism. "They should have told me everything. But instead of using my brain to explain the phantom, I went off along a false scent of drugged food and drink."

Millicent Meredith had been gazing at Darwin admiringly, but now she caught Jacob Pole's eye. He grinned at her in an irritating way. "I know, Milly. I've been through it myself with Erasmus a hundred times." He turned to Darwin. "I'm sure that you and Richard think you are being as clear as day, but I have to tell you that for people like Milly and me, it's all darkness. Short words and simple, 'Rasmus, and quick. I did exactly what I was told to do when I was driving the coach, so I know *who* was the phantom—it was Richard—but for the life of me I still don't know *how* was the phantom."

Milly nodded vigorously. "That's my question. How could he walk through the walls of a coach, and never once be seen?"

Darwin raised an eyebrow at Richard Dunwell, who nodded. "Not *walk*, but *float*. For the phantom was no more than thin air. In Paris, the celebrated Monsieur Lavoisier showed it to me: a gas, simply prepared, with a faint, sweet smell, which at first renders a person cheerful, and then quickly insensible. That is what you released into the cabriolet, Colonel Pole, when Brandon and Kathleen were within it. I had experimented—on myself—and learned that it is safe to use for short periods. Once the occupants of the coach were asleep, anyone had a good five minutes after opening the door before the fresh air awakened the passengers."

"And again, I had evidence placed before my face—and ignored it." Darwin scowled, placed a whole brandied plum in his mouth, and struggled to speak around it. "Second robbery—downpour of rain. Passengers *wet*. But coach not leaky—saw that for myself. So someone been inside. If passengers don't see, they must be asleep."

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"But why *robberies?*" Milly seemed as confused as ever. "Surely, Richard, you didn't come all the way from France to rob your own relatives? Suppose you had been caught?"

"Caught, stealing that which was in justice already his?" Kathleen spoke for the first time, color touching her high cheekbones. "He had every right to take—"

"No, Katie." Richard Dunwell squeezed her hand, and at the pressure and his look she fell silent. "I did in truth steal, simply because I needed money to stay. When I came here I had intended a brief visit, only to look at you once again and confirm that all was well. Your face told me that it was not. And when I saw Brandon, and watched his walk, I knew at that point I could not leave."

'Brandon's *walk?*" Milly Meredith gave Darwin one startled look of comprehension. "Happiness *and* health—"

He nodded his head gravely. "Kathleen is doubly lucky—triply lucky. She has avoided a disastrous union, and will marry a healthy and an honest man."

"Honest enough." Pole snapped his fingers and turned to Richard Dunwell. "But not *totally* honest. Come on, Richard, admit it. You persuaded young Georgie at the coach house to lie for you. He said that you had been driving the coach from St. Austell to Dunwell Cove for a long time, which convinced me that you at least could not be the phantom."

Dunwell frowned back at him. "Georgie said that? I cannot explain his statement. I told you, I came to England little more than two months ago, when I heard word of a possible wedding. And I said nothing to Georgie."

"You mean that *he* was lying?"

"Not so, Jacob." Darwin had eaten everything in sight. Now he was sitting back contentedly and ogling Milly Meredith, not at all to her displeasure. "For a while I was as puzzled as you by Georgie's duplicity. Then I realized that he was not lying. He was telling the exact truth—as he perceived it."

Darwin pointed down below the table, to where the basset hound was blissfully licking Richard Dunwell's hand. "For to a ten-year-old boy, or to a dog—are not two months an eternity?" ●

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NEXT ISSUE

SEPTEMBER COVER STORY

Robert Reed returns with a vivid and colorful sequel to 1993's popular "Sister Alice," catapulting us millions of years into the future and thousands of light-years into space, and then sweeping us along on a fast-paced cosmic chase of mind-boggling scale and scope, with the destiny of worlds at stake, all in company with the enigmatic but immensely powerful figure of "Brother Perfect."

BIG-NAME AUTHORS

Australian writer **Greg Egan** launches an intrepid attack on the most abstract realms of higher mathematics with a computer made entirely of light, with potentially disastrous results for the entire universe when those abstract realms start to strike back, in "Luminous"; **Allen Steele** takes us to a battle-torn Moon to explore the curious origin of "The War Memorial"; and gonzo **Don Webb** unravels a complex otherworldly conspiracy that is weird even by his standards—and that's weird—as he reveals the secrets that went into the making of "Paradise Lost."

EXCITING NEW WRITERS

Diane Mapes explores the hidden places of the human heart, and then moves on into uncharted territories of mystery, in the lyrical and passionate "Green"; and wild man **Eliot Fintushel** serves us a tasty slice of "Fillet of Man," hot and juicy, right off the flank, and spiced with Fintushel's usual blend of machine-gun conceptualization and bizarre humor.

FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" and an array of other columns and features. Look for our September issue on sale on your newsstands on July 18, 1995.

COMING SOON

Ursula K. Le Guin, Pat Cadigan, Bruce Sterling, Ian MacLeod, Allen Steele, John Kessel, Nancy Kress, Alexander Jablokov, Tanith Lee, Harry Turtledove, Robert Reed, Paul J. McAuley, Phillip C. Jennings, Mary Rosenblum, Michael Bishop, Greg Egan, Tom Purdom, Eliot Fintushel, and many more.

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Wil McCarthy

ROCKET GHOSTS

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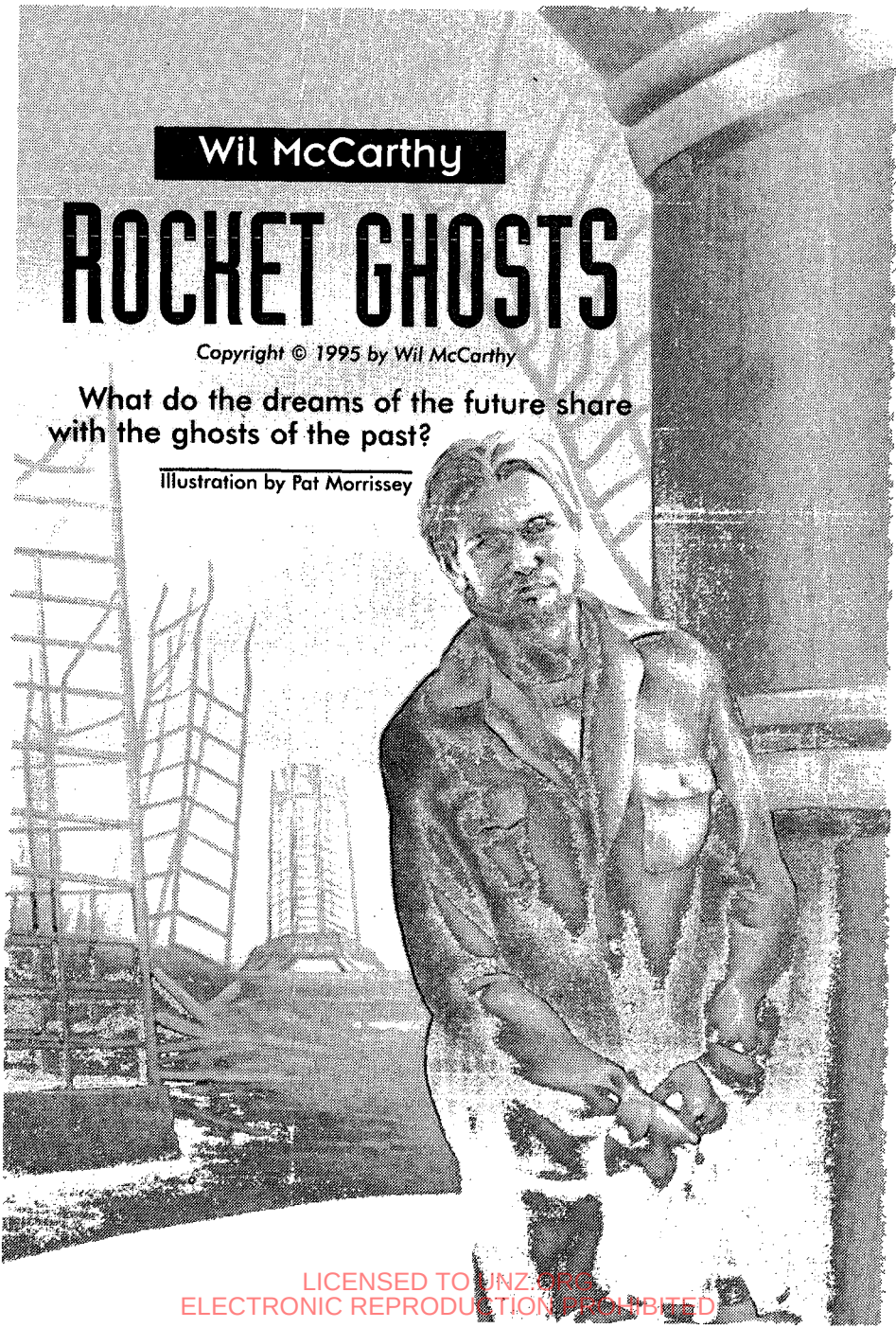
What do the dreams of the future share with the ghosts of the past?

Illustration by Pat Morrissey



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I leave the engineering building for the last time, and the door closes behind me without a sound. My Cherokee is there, across the parking lot, away from the doors because I got in late. No problem, my tardiness; what can they do, fire me? The thought brings out a ghostly smile.

The lot is uncrowded, cars huddled in half-circles by the north and south entrances, a wide expanse of empty pavement between, shimmering blankly in the heat. I've hung on a long time, watched friend after friend hit the street, hurried along by the motherly jackboot of the Marklin-Bethesda Corporation. But it's time for me to go, now, too. No rockets anymore, no space program to build them for. The Denver plant shuts down in a week. I hope somebody is left to turn out the lights.

Beyond my car I can see the dig, archaeologists' assistants scurrying about like busy insects. Looking for ghosts. The hogback ridge, the great red-gold wall that separates Marklin from Springfield Reservoir and the park surrounding it, hides a secret canyon covered in ancient petroglyphs. Ooh, big discovery. I could have told you that twenty years ago. But the folks from Boulder are delirious, too eager even to wait for the plant to close before they spade and trowel up the earth.

The crack isn't visible until you're right up in front of it. It snakes back into the rocks, a path wide enough for two large men, sheer walls so high the sun is visible only at noon, plus or minus a half hour or so. There are bees back there, too—nasty, aggressive little biters swarming from mud hives hanging in the shadows. I wonder, with another spectral grin, what the archaeologists are doing about that.

I could have saved them a bit of trouble, of course. There are the ghosts of bonfires, in there beyond the bees. Also the brown wall-markings, just stripes really, and a few things that might or might not be digging sticks. Nothing exciting, nothing to write *National Geographic* about. Nobody has ever lived here. The Kiowa, like the space program, camped for a while and moved on.

I could stroll down and tell them this, but they'd dig anyway. It's what they do. And anyway, I have other business.

It's very hot today, the sun burning like a heating element in a sky that has been virtually cloudless. The Cherokee's door handle scorches my fingers, and my butt all but sizzles on the blue vinyl seat as I slide in. The engine doesn't want to start, at first, but I convince it, and take the parking brake off.

A left turn will take me out to the front gates where, badgeless, I will never reenter. The "alumni" we are called, as if we have graduated from some vast academy, one which has prepared us for nothing, which has taught us no skills the world has use for. Out there is my future. What is left is *left,* as Confucius might have joked, if he'd had any sense of humor at all. I turn right instead, up the hill, up the floor of the valley

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that is Marklin-Bethesda. So many buildings up there, shiny ones and rusted ones, tin shacks and high-tech mock adobe, each representing a different contractor, a different era. These are places where real work was done, where spacecraft were dreamed and built and tested. The road less traveled, to be sure.

I drive through a forest of three-letter acronyms, TSB and RDL, IRF and FTS. Each is a word, a place, memory coded for easy retrieval. This is a haunted, magical forest: here a robot rusting in the sun, its arm frozen mid-stroke. There a rocket stage, unpainted and engineless, waiting for the flatbed trailer that will never arrive.

The road forks, and forks again, and each time I take the older way.

I pass the settling and evaporation ponds, the ghosts of Cold War past. Nearly empty, now, they are shallow bowls of cracking clay. Metal-rich, to be sure—we used to dump our used etching baths out here. It wasn't wrong back then, it was . . . clever of us. We were tough and bright, and unafraid. I remember a day when the red-girdered Systems Test tower spewed out a thick cloud of purple mist. No alarms, no explanations. It was odorless, inoffensive to eyes and lungs, so we laughed and danced out in it, then got in our cars and drove home for dinner. Decades later, the EPA would feign horror at what we had done.

I climb higher still. The road turns to gravel, and then to dirt. The grade increases. I put the Cherokee in four-wheel drive.

Up here are the old, old ghosts. Test stands and test silos and even a launch pad or two, from the days when the plains across the hogback were empty, when sounding rockets could cleave the sky with their thunder, smashing to earth twenty or thirty miles downrange to be gathered up and examined minutely. Everything was new, back then. The sky was no limit to us.

Whatever became of *that* Marklin Corporation? Bold and innovative, able to leap tall development contracts? Today, on my last stinking day, I got static for using the Internet gateway on the unclassified computers. "Company policy," the guard had sniped. "Use of the network gates has to be work-related, and tied to a specific project. Offloaded employees are especially prohibited from using these facilities." I didn't bother arguing with him. He was doing his job, doing what the new and improved Marklin-Bethesda told him he had to. And I was finished anyway.

LONG POST WARNING, the message had begun. Five thousand words, posted to every newsgroup on the goddamn net. A horrible breach of etiquette, but then . . . let the electronic masses "flame" my mailbox with angry letters, I won't be there to collect them. In fact, my account is probably voided already, a blank wall from which the letters will rebound like so many rubber checks.

I HAVE MADE AN IMPORTANT BREAKTHROUGH, I went on to

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say, BUT THANKS TO SOME PAPERS I SIGNED A LONG, LONG TIME AGO, MY WORK IS MOST LIKELY THE PROPERTY OF THE BANKRUPT MARKLIN-BETHESDA CORPORATION, AND AN ASSET WHICH THE COURTS WILL AUCTION TO REPAY SHAREHOLDER DEBTS. BECAUSE I WISH TO SERVE MANKIND, A CLUB TO WHICH WALL STREET DOES NOT BELONG, I AM THROWING EVERYTHING OUT INTO THE PUBLIC DOMAIN. PLEASE HELP THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE FIND ITS WAY INTO THE WRONG HANDS.

The road is really rough, now, a pair of wheelruts running up through the scrub oak and the buffalo grass. Running alongside is the remains of what looks like narrow-gauge railway. What ran on those tracks I have no idea. The ghost is older than anything I've seen.

Sharp bits of rusted, twisted steel poke up through the ground, as if a structure had stood here once on this slope, and later been torn away. I turn the steering wheel back and forth, slaloming at a full 5 mph, to avoid catching a tire. But there is more and more of the metal, less and less of the wheel ruts for me to follow. Ahead, the path gives out to broken concrete and strange, rusted things. It's time to stop.

What is this stuff? Why aren't the archaeologists up *here,* rooting through the remains of a culture that reached to the moon and beyond?

I open my door and step out. The air conditioning has been on in the Cherokee, and without noticing I have become cool. The heat is a surprise, bringing forth instant sweat. I take off my tie and drop it on the seat.

My keys jingle like a shaman's baubles as the hatchback swings open. I move the tarp aside, pull out the Device. God, it looks like hell. I should have painted it, at least. It's heavy. Staggering with the load, I get over to one of the concrete blocks and set it down.

I pause, thinking of what I am about to do. Of such moments is history made. The moment passes. I wipe my brow, dig my feet in, and jerk the pull cord for all I'm worth. Like the trusty mower it used to be, the Device starts right up.

ROARRrrrr . . . .

Silent by nature, it damps out its own vibrations, *consumes* its own vibrations to produce. . . .

The shadow beneath the Device changes shape, changes size. I can see daylight beneath it. Feather light, lighter than feather light, it leaves its cement launch pad and . . . drifts . . . upward. It has slipped the surly bonds of Earth to touch, not the face of God, but that of downtown Denver. My Internet post will look like a crank message, no different from the common techno-ravings of the cybernetically insane. No one will read it, at first. But when the UFO reports start rolling in, when the Device

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runs out of two-cycle unleaded and thunks down in the middle of Civic Center Park. . . . That's assuming my guidance system works, of course, but I've built a guidance system or two in my day.

A breeze gusts through, and the Device bobs with it, rising a little more, moving east and north a bit.

"That's one giant leap," I say, feeling that something should be said.

The wind picks up, and the Device goes along and away with it, toward futures as yet undreamed, leaving the ghosts and the fossils behind. ●

"I'm not actually a muse. I'm just here to help with the desktop clutter."

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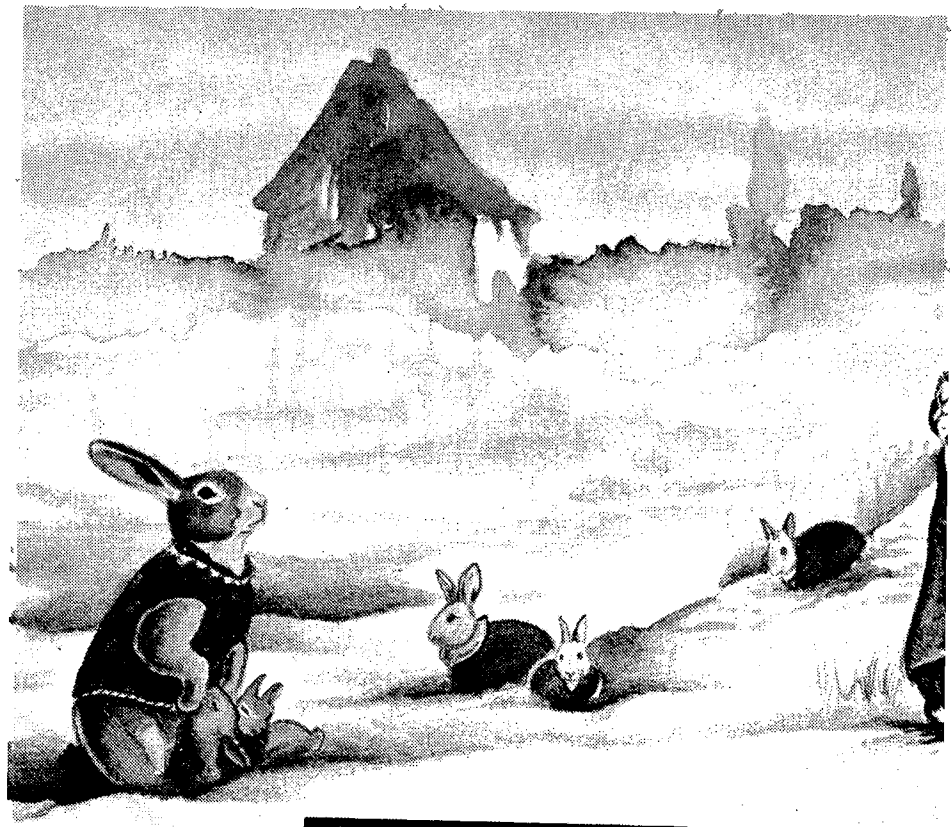

Candyce Byrne

THE DEATH OF BEATRIX POTTER

Candyce Byrne is an Army brat who spent her childhood in Stockholm, Madrid, and all over the United States. Although "The Death of Beatrix Potter" is her first fiction sale, she is a published poet and medical writer, and a playwright whose work has been produced locally (in Wharton, Texas,) and in Houston. Ms. Byrne tells us she fell into Miss Potter's world when her teenaged son was two years old. *"Peter Rabbit* was the book he most wanted to hear. I soon memorized the text, and could recite it mindlessly while I dissolved into those marvelous paintings."

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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Beatrix, her mind in riot, knelt in the ranunculus bed by the corner of the cottage. What is there about war, she thought, that makes one want to tidy up? She went on ripping out exhausted foliage and tossing it in a green-brown pile on the grass behind her.

It was a letter from a friend in London, full of details of the destruction of Hamburg by Allied bombers, that had driven her to such distraction. Such waste! Such incredible human stupidity! She had hurried out into the garden before William, old fussbudget, could shake his head and say, "Bee—you oughtn't do such things at your age. Let Mr Cannon do the weeding."

As soon as she had the flower-bed thoroughly cleaned, she planned to sift through the soil for each little gold-brown corm, which she would collect in her skirt. She would shake off the dirt, tie them up in cheesecloth, and hang them in the potting-shed for the winter. If only the glorious connexion of her fingers with the earth, soaked that morning with rain swept over the mountains from the cold Irish Sea, could numb the old-age ache in her shoulders, her wrists, her elbows, her knees. She wouldn't be able to stand this cramped position for long.

An ominous drone filled the air, something mechanical and angry, much too angry for bees. She leaned back, resting her plump *derriére* on the heels of her brogans. Although no bombers had ever trespassed into the Lake District skies or over the village of Sawrey, she scanned carefully for the silver flash of an aeroplane, perhaps one of those lumbering American Flying Fortresses quartered to the north—not so far away—in Scotland, or even a lost German looking for London.

She saw an intense blue heaven, washed clean by the morning's rain, and the fingertips of trees waving their gorgeous autumn foliage. The angry hum grew louder, but the sweep of sky revealed only a distant flock of geese in ragged formation. Nothing unusual, nothing mechanical. Her gaze fell to the blue slate roofs, whitewashed walls, and geranium-filled window-sills of the cottage that had been her home for thirty years. She turned and looked through a half-open gate toward the vegetable garden with its fish pond and potting-shed, and beyond them, the green-gold trees that edged the wood. On the other side of the cottage was Sawrey itself, that cluster of cottages recognised by children round the world because she had put so many of them into the watercolours she painted to illustrate her thirty little books (the human population mostly replaced with animals and dolls). Beyond the village would be the mirror-like surface of Esthwaite Water and its surrounding green meadows; rising in the far distance, the rolling fells, bronze with November bracken, and the grey granite crag called Coniston Old Man.

The angry whine swelled, and she realized abruptly that the aeroplane was in her head rather than in the sky. The sound seemed loud enough

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to shatter her skull. Beatrix Potter fell forward and lay face-down among the ranunculus.

Brrrriiii-iiiii-iiiiiii-iiiiiiiiiii-pppppppp! The mouse child Pauly Jackson looked up to see the tissue of the sky laid open in a long wound, through which a silver-skinned monster descended, roaring as it dropped something black from its belly. The Something whistled as it fell into the meadow beside Esthwaite Water, where it exploded mightily and sent clods and shredded vegetation flying.

Pauly saw his own surprise and terror reflected in the uplifted faces of his brother Nick and his sister Annabel and his cousin Maria. Only a moment before they had been playing ninepins with a crab-apple and some pine cones in the front garden of the house his family shared with Elizabeth Twitchit and her kittens. And now this incomprehensible thing was happening—

With a grinding roar unlike anything Pauly had ever heard in his two weeks of life, the monster was flying over the village of Sawrey, over the helpless little houses, the Tower Bank Arms, and Sally Henny Penny's little shop with its shivery glass window. The monster's belly opened to expel another dark, whistling Thing. It spiraled into the roof of Mrs Ribston's house down the lane, and exploded, sending wood and slates flying. Maria's family lived behind Mrs Ribston's staircase. All four children cried out, aware that no one in that house could have survived the explosion. Orange flames and black smoke billowed from the ruined cottage, followed by such an awful smell that Pauly had to fight to breathe. A terrible blue glare, as of nothingness, a void, shone from the wreckage.

Maria collapsed, sobbing, on the ground.

Mice and cats and geese and dogs—all the folk of Sawrey—began to boil out of their houses onto the streets. Pauly looked round for the German doll that served as village policeman—he was nowhere to be seen. (*And probably would have proved useless*, thought Pauly, *with his brain of cotton batting.*) He saw the old hedgehog washerwoman, a descendant of dear Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, run from Henny Penny's store, her apron thrown over her prickly head. Peeking round the edge of the cloth, her little eyes widened as she caught sight of the monster heading up the valley toward Cat's Bells, the hill where she made her home. With a high thin echoing wail—"*My pinnies my pinnies my pinnies*"—she waddled with amazing speed down the street and over the bridge across Esthwaite Water. Pauly quickly lost the sound of her distress among the barking of dogs, the screaming of cats, the shouting of hens.

Pauly's mother detached herself from the crowd and ran toward the gardenful of frightened children. "Don't stand out here in the . . . rain,"

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she scolded. She was all of a twitter about the monster, Pauly knew, not angry at *them*.

She hurried all four of them indoors, through Mrs Twitchit's sitting room and kitchen and into the family's little flat behind the skirting-board beside the stove. She told them they would all, even Maria, have to take baths and put on clean clothes, and have a dose of camomile tea. She made Annabel and Maria and Nick sit in a line on the wooden settle next to the fireplace, and then put Pauly in the tub and began to scrub his ears, a little too fiercely.

"At times like this," she said, "it's best to think of Miss Potter's words." Her voice demanded complete attention. "Now, the Fifth Little Book was to be called *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*. . . ."

Pauly knew they were about to hear a tale of the First Days.

"In Miss Potter's rooms on the third floor of the house of Her birth in the distant land of London, Miss Potter asked her friend and publisher, Mr. Norman Warne, to build a fine glass-fronted doll's house. Miss Potter planned to watch through the glass and then draw the adventures of her dear pet, Hunca Munca, with a handsome gentleman mouse—they were to break into the house like burglars and find a magnificent feast spread on the dining room table—"

The oft-told words took the edge off Pauly's terror. He felt almost comforted as his mother dried him roughly with a towel and popped Annabel into the tub.

"—two red lobsters and a ham, a fish, a pudding, some pears and some oranges. But the food was made of plaster, all molded in a piece with the plates, beautiful but impossible to eat. Which was to make them so angry they would smash the food to bits, rip up the linens, and steal clothes and other things belonging to the house's inhabitants, Lucinda Doll and Jane Cook Doll."

Annabel, damp and chilled, sat on the hearth rug, and Maria took her place in the tub.

"Miss Potter planned to have Hunca Munca and her gentleman pay for their crimes with a sixpence and Hunca Munca's services in sweeping and cleaning with the broom and dustpan (money, broom, and dustpan all stolen from the dolls!), and then they'd get married and live happily ever after and have many children. That was Miss Potter's plan.

"However . . ." said Mrs Jackson, looking at each child in turn to raise anticipation for this favorite part of their favorite story. "*However*, the 'ticing aroma of the beautiful Hunca Munca drifted belowstairs to the kitchens and caught the attention of a young male mouse. A brave, resourceful mouse. A wild, nameless mouse. He hid in the laundry basket and was carried up to the third floor. As soon as he set eyes on Hunca Munca, he vowed she would be the mother—"

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Something roared overhead, and then they heard that awful, screaming whistle.

The walls rattled, and for a moment everyone's heart stopped beating. But no explosion followed.

After a breathless moment they heard a dull thump, so muffled that it must have been on the far side of the Water. The little mice gasped for air.

"—vowed she would be the mother of his children," finished Mrs Jackson. She was crying softly, but her voice was angry. "I am affronted! Nothing like this has ever happened in Miss Potter's world! In *this* world, nothing ever changes, not since the First Days. Oh, my poor babies—"

She put Nick into the tub and continued her story. "Before the nameless young mouse could make Hunca Munca's acquaintance, Miss Potter caught sight of him and picked him up and looked into his eyes, and from that moment he was Her creature. 'Ah, just the thing!' She cried. 'A husband for Hunca Munca. I shall call you Jacky.' "

Pauly drew close to Maria and took her hand in his.

"Miss Potter put Jacky in the doll's house with Hunca Munca and got out Her drawing materials. But Jacky had other mischief in mind. He chased Hunca Munca all over the house, from attic to cellar, and Hunca Munca was pleased. So when they reached the—well, as country mice, you know all about these things."

She usually giggled and rolled her eyes when she came to this part of the tale, and everyone always laughed. But this time she was trembling uncontrollably, her face wet with tears. Pauly shivered. She was giving up! That was all right for her—she was old and had many babies. But it wasn't fair to ask the young to give up just because the world order had taken an unpredictable hop. And weren't they used to danger? Hadn't they lived their whole lives behind the skirting-board in a cat's kitchen—a cat who loved nothing so much as a nice mouse pie?

The story wasn't over, Pauly knew. "Miss Potter was inclined to laugh," his mother said in a whispery voice that made the children lean close to hear, "but Mr. Warne was upset. 'We can't,' he said, 'have such things in a children's book!' And so Miss Potter was obliged to write a new husband for Hunca Munca, a mouse who would do what he was told, a mouse by the name of Tom Thumb. But Jacky had the last laugh, for when Hunca Munca's children were born, they were Jacky's, not Tom Thumb's. Jacky was your hundredth, hundredth, three-hundredth great-grandfather, and from that day to this, the Jacksons have been part of Miss Potter's world."

They huddled together for a moment, and then a distant clacketty sound, followed by a dull *thud*, made them jump and look anxiously toward the ceiling even though the sound was far off in the hills.

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"It's the End Times," murmured their mother, pulling Nick out of the tub and clutching him, dripping and soapy, to her breast. "End Times!"

Pauly squeezed Maria's paw. He resolved in his heart that, as soon as they were old enough, they would marry. They would build a home somewhere safe—perhaps deep under the potting-shed in Mr McGregor's garden—and try to lead as normal a life as possible, under the circumstances.

A thud. A *whummp*. A terrible metallic screech. A shudder that shook the earth to its fundaments.

In the musky depths of his mousehole under the potting-shed floor, the young father named Pauly Jackson shivered, half awake. He should go outside and investigate, he thought. But over the last six weeks, bumps in the day and bumps in the night had become too commonplace to question. Better to sleep away the terrible days, the terrible nights. He wriggled down in the warm nest, snuggling closer to Maria and their babies. Tomorrow would be soon enough to find out what new carnage the night had brought.

At half-past three on a bleak December afternoon, William waited at the front door for Mary Cannon's knock. She was on time, as usual. Over the six weeks of Bee's illness, the old countrywoman and William had fallen into a routine almost like marriage, although the helpless creature they cared for was not a child but William's wife. Mary entered the cottage quickly, bringing a blast of frigid air with her.

"Doctor's just left," William said. "He says she's resting better, but—"

Mary clucked softly and patted William's arm. "Poor, dear Mr Heelis," she said. "How're ye holdin' up?"

"*I'm* fine, of course, Mary. Don't worry about me."

William followed Mary's broad back up the stairs and into his wife's bedroom. Tiny and frail, Bee lay in the heavy oak four-poster bed she had loved for nearly forty years. Her shallow but regular breathing made the featherbed rise and fall rhythmically.

He hated the vacant stare that had taken over her eyes. She'd been so terribly ill for six weeks and had wasted away to almost nothing, but she'd always recognised him. Until this morning, when she slipped into what the doctor called "a coma, a blessing really. She'll rest easier now." Her eyes, half open, with great dark circles under them, oppressed him—the familiar hazel eyes he knew so well yet didn't recognise with the snapping personality drained out. Shakespeare's "bare, ruined choirs" leapt into his mind.

She looked so old. She'd aged over the years, but she'd never looked

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old. Her face, like her figure, had always been plump—now she looked like a corpse. Seventy-seven wasn't old, was it? He felt betrayed.

"I'm afraid I'll come in one day and find her dead," he said, turning his face so that Mary couldn't see his tears. He looked out the window, pretending to be absorbed in the bridge arching over the glassy waters of the Esthwaite, the wintry woods, the distant crags.

"Well, I expect that's just how 'twill be, Mr Heelis. And 'twill be a blessing. She's had a good life. I expect she's ready to go."

Mary would wail first and loudest when the time came, William knew, but when it was over, she'd go on, capable and efficient as ever. He, on the other hand, was having trouble imagining life after Mrs Heelis's death.

Mary began to change the linens, saying, "I'll tend to her. Go get some rest—"

"No, Mary. I'll be in the sitting room. I've a bit of work to catch up on."

She raised her eyebrows reprovingly but didn't scold him. "I'll bring yer tea terreckly."

On his way downstairs, William began to put his thoughts in order. Setting his methodical solicitor's mind to some task would, he hoped, help him through the difficult night ahead. He had been making background notes for a short monograph he planned to write about his wife; the world would care when Mrs Heelis died. Not because she was Bee Heelis, but because she was Beatrix Potter, and had written and illustrated those thirty famous little books, at least one of which could be found in every nursery. From time to time articles appeared in the newspapers comparing her paintings with those of Constable or Reynolds, or saying that her little books had influenced Graham Greene, the novelist, or Mr Auden, the poet. Or calling *Peter Rabbit* "the best short story in the English language. . . ." Rubbish, Bee called it. Usually she tried to ignore it, but sometimes she would send letters of rebuke. She could be sharp-tongued when she chose. Starchy. Like Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, her old hedgehog washerwoman. She'd needed that starch when Mr Disney came pestering her, wanting to turn *Peter Rabbit* into a cartoon for the nickelodeon.

What a charming miniature world Bee had created, where the year was always 1902, where there were neither wars nor motorcars, aeroplanes nor electric lights, and where the animal inhabitants were almost human, and yet uncannily natural. No English-speaking childhood was complete without Bee's books about Tabitha Twitchit and her cousin Mrs Ribston and funny old Mrs Tiggy-Winkle and poor Jemima Puddle-duck. The world would care about the death of Beatrix Potter.

Pauly jerked awake from dreamless sleep. Grim afternoon light falling through the uncovered door showed him Maria huddled in a wooden

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chair by the low iron gate, in which a feeble fire flickered. Coal was impossible to come by in these long days while Miss Potter lay dying, and wood was scarce, almost too precious to burn. Pauly's heart hurt to see Maria's thin, dull coat, her lustreless eyes, her frail body—she looked more like the parody of a mouse than the plump animal a new mother should be.

Maria cradled the littlest baby, the one they called Mollie, in her arms. "She died just a few minutes ago," she whispered.

The four other Jackson babies, nestled with their father in the bed of shredded papers, mewed weakly as Pauly jumped up. So—they were still alive, he thought. He felt a flood of relief and joy that surprised him.

Pauly saw the tears puddle in the corner of Maria's eye and trickle down her cheek. "The poor little thing never had a chance," she said hoarsely. "None of 'em has a chance."

Pauly went to her and lifted the tiny body from Maria's slack paws. "You crawl back in bed and keep the others warm," he said. "I'll—take care of her."

Maria laid her scrawny body on the bed, amongst their ill-timed brood. The pups nosed at her belly, eyes closed but mouths open, searching for the teats. One by one, they latched on and pulled. And cried because their mother had no milk.

Pauly scrabbled in the corner until he found a bit of rag, a former dusting cloth scavenged from Farmer Potatoes' wife's dustbin, still redolent of beeswax and dust; he knotted it at his neck and wrapped himself and Mollie up as best he could. He peered through the door, his twitching nose relieved by the cold air. His eyes smarted in the light reflected by the snow outside, and he waited for his pupils to adjust—he wanted to be sure nothing dangerous lurked nearby before he left the burrow. Where was it, the flying metal beast that had reduced Miss Potter's world to rubble? They'd lacked words for it when it appeared during his childhood, but now the names had appeared—they called it "bomber" and "aeroplane," and knew the hideous grinding roar as the sound of "engine."

He looked carefully up and down the path, once straight as an arrow through the heart of Mr McGregor's garden in the heart of Miss Potter's world. Today it sagged sadly in both directions, pulled out of shape by the weight of impending doom. The garden on either side lay fallow, untended, abandoned by its gardener.

Up the path, through a green gate half collapsed on rusty hinges, Pauly could see a second gate into Miss Potter's cottage garden, and, above it, barely discernible against the winter-white sky, Miss Potter's snow-blanketed roof.

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Down the path and beyond the grey stone wall lay the wreck of Sawrey, its tidy cottages reduced to bombed-out craters. An eerie blue glow gleamed from the jagged holes where doors and windows had been. Curving round the village, littered with dead fish, was a smear of bomb-pocked mud that once was Esthwaite Water.

Farther still, the burnt and blackened trees that from time out of mind had been called "Jemima's wood" writhed like frozen dancers in the filthy snow.

Fear chewed at Pauly's spine as he scurried towards Miss Potter's gate. But there was no sign of the monster. Apprehension that it might swoop up from Mr McGregor's rubbish heap, from the frozen fish pond, from behind the garden wall, was worse than the actual snarl of its engines or silver glint of its belly would have been.

Clutching his dead baby tightly against his chest with his right front leg, Pauly dropped to his three remaining feet to skirt the dark stain on the flagstones in front of the rubbish heap. Only last week old Bess, last in the long line of Twitchit tabbies, had found him scavenging there amongst moldy straw and rotten onions, the stinking remains of the once-bountiful pile. The cat had started towards him halfheartedly (more, he decided later, from habit than from desire to eat and so live on) when they heard the bomber overhead. He watched in horror as the aeroplane swooped down—

But Bess turned from the chase with an expression that mingled terror with relief. She ran toward the beast, her face upturned. "Take me, take me," she cried. "You killed my babies—take me, too!"

The great explosion had turned her into a red-orange mash of fur and entrails on the garden path. As he edged past, Pauly noticed that a disagreeable odour still clung to the spot.

Once again, he wished for his family's old enemy back. They had had an accommodation—the Jacksons and the Twitchits had hunted each other and taunted each other and outwitted each other generation after generation, but they had shared Miss Potter's world and prospered. Today, between the bombing and the dreadful cold, the entire world, save for Miss Potter's house, was a shambles.

Pauly passed through the gaping garden gate and hid behind a clay pot that held brittle, bony stems; the astringent smell told him they had once been geraniums. A narrow cart track separated the vegetable garden from Miss Potter's gate. Pauly surveyed carefully—the way was clear. He dashed to the gate and squeezed under.

The lawn and the fir trees that flanked the two-storey slatestone cottage were cloaked with snow, and a thick white mantle covered the peaked roof.

The house looked dead, its windows shrouded in bleak blue shadow.

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Pauly bore Mollie to the wooden bench just to the right of the front door, and laid her beneath it, cushioned by a drift of snow.

"This is a special spot, Mollie," he whispered. "A holy spot. When I was very young, I came to this garden with my brother Nick and my sister Annabel. We hid right here under the bench, and we saw Her. We saw Miss Potter. It was dreadfully dangerous. A single *kertyschoo* and we'd have been discovered—"

In Pauly's memory, the trees and grass had been achingly green. A man—Mr Heelis—stood with a box camera in the middle of the grassy lawn. He was taking photographs of Miss Potter (never Mrs Heelis to their loving hearts) in honour of Her seventy-seventh birthday. Mr Heelis was long and thin but broad through the middle like a pear, and he towered over Miss Potter, even though She was standing on the top step of the porch and he on the lawn below.

Miss Potter's plump hands were tightly wrapped round the handle of Her cane. She wore a woollen skirt and top, with a cardigan over it against the autumn chill. A close-fitting, rather shapeless hat came down to Her eyes, which were piercing but really quite kind. Her round head with its long nose and chin looked a bit like a potato. She was smiling.

Nevertheless, it was clear that She was in charge. "Hurry up, William," She said. "I haven't all day for this."

William stepped back, trying to focus the camera lens. Miss Potter's favourite old Collie-dog was sunning himself on the lawn just where Mr Heelis stepped. Mr Heelis went over backwards, his big feet flailing the air. The dog whimpered but was too arthritic to do more than glare at Mr Heelis and thump his tail on the grass, accusing with one end and forgiving with the other. His eyes were clouded by cataracts, and he couldn't see three adoring little mice under the garden bench.

"When we got back home," Pauly murmured into Mollie's ear, "our mum was *terribly* affronted. How she yelled at us! 'Don't you realise what dogs do to little mice?' she said. 'They shake them till their necks break and then they eat them!' She whipped us all soundly and sent us to bed without any supper."

Pauly stroked the thin baby-fur on the cold body. He wept as much for the scrapes Mollie and her brothers and sisters would never get themselves into as for the generations of future Jacksons that would never be, as much for his own lost life as for his children's. He kissed his daughter farewell and covered her gently with Miss Potter's snow.

As he lifted his eyes from the pitiful mound, light blossomed weakly from the lower front windows of the cottage. Food, he thought. There would be food inside. He scuttered across the snowy lawn and searched under the front door until he found a low spot on the lintel that permitted him to squeeze inside.

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* * *

When William reached the sitting room he lit the coal oil lamp in a vain attempt to dispel the dark and melancholy afternoon. After laying a new log on the coals in the fire-place, he riffled among the papers at his end of the writing table, looking for his green ledger book on the comfortably cluttered desk he and Bee had shared for thirty years. The right-hand side of the long wooden table was his, heaped with the overflow of records and papers from his solicitor's office in the village. Bee ran her complex businesses—landowner, farmer, president of the Herdwick Sheepbreeders' Association, crusader for the National Trust—from the other end. On bitter afternoons during the long Lakeland winter, when weather prevented more important occupations, she would sit there looking over her manuscripts and sketches; her publisher was always sending letters saying her public was clamouring for another little book. Still, over the years, she'd mostly given up her little fictions. A pity, when people enjoyed them so.

He was uncertain what was to be done about the things at her end of the desk. He hesitated to touch anything, but dust was beginning to gather. He could see a half-eaten bar of Cadbury's chocolate, a wartime luxury, peeking from the tangled pile. Energetic, in full charge of her worlds and enterprises, Bee had been in high spirits on that first day in November—that crisp, golden afternoon—when she took the unaccountable urge to dig in the garden. She'd put down her magazine and her chocolate, taken up gloves and a trowel, and gone outside. And he'd gone out not ten minutes later and found her collapsed among the ranunculus. She'd been confined to her room since then, her condition ever worsening.

Ah—there was the ledger. He found a pen and settled himself in his chair beside the fire.

Mary's heavy tread sounded on the stair and went back towards the kitchen. Mary Cannon. Bee sometimes used her as the model when she needed the shadowy presence of a human female in one of her books. The text might call her "Farmer Potatoes' wife" or "Mr McGregor's wife," but in the picture it was unmistakably Mary Cannon who threatened to take Jemima Puddle-duck's eggs away, thus persuading the muddle-headed creature to build a secret nest in the wood, in the fox's own lair. It was Mary Cannon who'd baked Peter Rabbit's father into a pie.

William heard a scrabbling sound behind the long-case clock beside the front door—a mouse—? The old cottage was full of mice, despite Mary's best efforts to get rid of them. And Bee, dear soul, was inclined to make them into pets.

Well. None of this maundering would do for the monograph. Bee would never approve of making such personal matters public. With his scratchy pen he began to write.

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21 December 1943

After a terrifying incident, a stroke or some such thing, at about four this morning, Mrs Heelis is resting more comfortably this afternoon. Dare we hope she'll be feeling her old self again soon? Perhaps by the New Year. . . .

Pauly found himself in the cozy sitting room of a country cottage, deliciously warm and smelling of cheese and chocolate and paper and other things dear to a mouse's heart. He hid himself under the long-case clock beside the door while he surveyed the room.

On the opposite wall, under the window, was Miss Potter's writing table. It was messily heaped with papers, from which Pauly caught a wisp of scent—a pale, crumbly whiff of old chocolate. Beside the window, just where the busy Author might glance up and see it, was a framed watercolour painting of the legendary Peter Rabbit himself. The fat little fellow stood upright, wearing wooden clogs and a blue jacket with brass buttons, quite new. Quite a contrast, Pauly thought, to his own rags.

The sharp odor of Stilton cheese rose from a plate on the floor under the high-backed armchair pulled up to the fire-place fender. In the chair sat Mr Heelis, a notebook open on his lap, his pen *scr-r-ritching* across the page. Pauly considered his choices. Fresh cheese was preferable to old chocolate, but how close dare he come to a human being to get it? He scampered across the floor, jumped onto the small wooden chair pushed up to the writing table and then onto the litter of papers on top. He sat back on his haunches on the papers to regard Mr Heelis warily.

Mr Heelis watched Pauly just as closely, looking amused and, for a human being, surprisingly unperturbed to see a mouse in his sitting room. He seemed eager for Pauly's company. "You poor chap," he said. "Beatrix would be distressed to see you so thin and ragged."

The old man leaned forward, his face suddenly crumpling and his eyes filling with tears. "Things are in a muddle, aren't they, old boy? Doctor expects she'll be gone by morning."

Pauly cocked his head to one side, considering the implications.

Mr Heelis pulled a rumpled handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped his eyes. "We'll be all in a pickle without Mrs Heelis. She's the one who kept everything going, the farms and . . . everything. No one in the county did anything without Mrs Heelis's advice. A great old girl."

The old man lifted the ledger book in his lap and tipped it towards Pauly, showing him spidery lines of elegant script. "I was jotting down a few notes for my book," he continued. "I plan to call it *A Memoir of the Late Mrs William Heelis*—for private circulation, of course, among family, perhaps a few dear friends. Mrs Heelis disapproved of people who call attention to themselves in a vulgar way. But she's quite famous. She

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wrote little nursery tales and things, under her maiden name. Gave it up, mostly, thirty years ago. To become my wife."

Mr Heelis settled back in his chair. "I've known her since 'aught-five, when I helped her buy this very cottage, the first thing she ever bought for herself. Even though she was a great grown woman thirty-nine years old, she was very much tied to her parents. She'd gotten a bit of money for her first little book—" Mr Heelis pointed to the watercolour of the blue-coated Rabbit on the wall, and Pauly regarded it solemnly. "That's the hero of it, you know. There was a real Peter once, her pet for years and years until he got old. She put him to death with her own hand when his time came—she was tough when she had to be.

"But you don't want to hear about that! She and the chap who'd published the book had fallen in love and decided to marry, even though her family didn't approve. Then the poor blighter—his name was Warne, Norman Warne—died of some sudden disease, just like that, and she shut herself up here. Very romantic. Like something in a book."

Pauly began to paw through the deeds and accounts and seed catalogues atop the desk. Miss Potter had been planning for spring when illness struck. The old man was still caught in the faraway past. "She worked herself to a near frazzle, writing and drawing, and all the time coming to my office for help in buying and managing more farms because she loved the Lakelands so. I never dreamt she'd be interested in a simple country solicitor like myself. It was eight years before I dared ask her to marry me. But we lived, as they say, happily ever after."

Under the *Herdwick Breeder's Gazette* for October 1943, Pauly found the chocolate bar. It was half-eaten, the jagged half-moon teeth marks undoubtedly Hers. Pauly tried to pick it up, but it was too large and too heavy for him. He gnawed one corner. The taste and smell made him gag.

Mr Heelis reached under his chair, fumbling with the plate, which contained a scrap of cheese and two water biscuits, one bitten into. "Here, old man, try this," he said, holding the uneaten biscuit towards Pauly. "Come on. I won't hurt you." He smiled encouragingly and shook the biscuit gently.

Pauly screwed up his courage and took a step forward.

"Come on," the old fellow coaxed again. The biscuit would be a feast, enough for Maria and all the children. Pauly made a dash to the man's feet and sat back on his haunches, stretching his paws up to receive the boon—

And the air was split by the *r-roar-r-r* of the aeroplane's engine. Through the window, Pauly saw the silver bomber zooming zooming zooming across the garden, directly towards the house.

Mr Heelis shook the biscuit. "What're you frightened of?" he said, unconcerned, unaware. "Come on. . . ."

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The bomber flew belly-first up past the window and disappeared, climbing toward the roof of Miss Potter's house. Then Pauly heard the distinct click and screech of the monster releasing one of its bombs, and the whistle as it fell.

The house began to vibrate—the bomb must be splitting the ceiling, Pauly thought. He cried out. His stomach lurched because Mr Heelis and the room seemed to have fractured into mirror images of themselves and then into ten—twenty—an infinite number of rooms with Mr Heelises waving a biscuit and roaring, in a great deep voice, words that Pauly couldn't understand. Pauly could see clear through the walls and the biscuits and the Mr Heelises as though none were real.

And then Mr Heelis pulled back into himself and became solid and singular again. He leaned over, proffering the biscuit, from his chair in the middle of the rug in front of the fireplace in the sitting-room of Miss Potter's house.

A noise at the top of the stairs made them both jump and look upwards. Heavy boots thumped onto the first landing and an old woman's face, red and wet with tears, appeared over the rail. "Oh, please come up, sir," she cried. "*Please*. It can't be much longer now—"

The old man's face grew pale. His fingers opened as though he had no control of them, and the biscuit spiraled slowly toward the floor. When it landed, time sped forward, and there was an explosion into crumbs and several larger shards.

Mr Heelis's huge shoe came down nearly upon the top of Pauly, cowering on the hearth rug, as the man bolted across the room and up the stairs, taking them two at a time with his long, gangly legs. The woman followed. Neither gave so much as a glance in Pauly's direction.

Pauly scuttered over to the biggest fragment and scooped it up, clasping it against his chest just as he had carried Mollie to Miss Potter's garden. He tottered awkwardly on hind legs towards the door and shoved the biscuit through the hole that marked the low place on the lintel. Then he snaked his thin body through, quick as quick, and stood on the door step outside.

Cold wind stung tears into his eyes and whipped his dust-cloth cloak away from his shivering body. The knot only barely held it round his neck; it was most difficult to hold onto the cloth and the precious morsel of biscuit. How glad Maria and the babies would be, he thought, when he brought it home to them.

He tried to find his way straight across the garden, but found himself becoming more and more puzzled. Presently, he came to a thin slice of land, the only remaining connexion between cottage gate and garden gate. It twisted and swayed, surrounded on all sides by blue glamour. Thinking that he surely would be destroyed if he ventured onto it, Pauly

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gave himself up for lost, and shed big tears. But then he steeled himself, trying to will his heart to stop its fearful racing. He knotted the biscuit in the ends of his cloak and forced himself out onto the treacherous bridge. As the abyss surrounded him with its choking non-smell, its deafening non-sound, he felt he had been reduced to his essence: a set of claws hauling a pounding heart along a frail thread. It began to twist under even so small a weight, and he felt himself falling . . .

Onto something incredibly hard and cold. Pauly opened his eyes and realised he had fallen safely beyond the gate of the vegetable garden, onto the icy surface of the frozen fish pond. He scrambled to his feet and was safe at last outside the burrow under the potting-shed.

His eyes required a moment to adjust to the profound dark inside the burrow before he could scurry across to the nest. Maria was huddled there, weak and obviously near death, the pups scattered around her. He looked at the pups and then at Maria, a question in his eyes.

She only shook her head at him.

He lifted the limp forms and kissed and embraced his children one by one. Then he unwrapped the biscuit and fed it to Maria, at the end taking only the tiniest crumbs for himself.

Maria tried to look cheerful. "I'll be all right now," she said.

Pauly began to cry. "It's the end of the world, Maria," he whispered. "Miss Potter will be dead by morning."

Maria gathered the babies beneath her, and lay down and shut her eyes.

They were civilized beings, and Pauly wanted them to be wearing some semblance of clothing when *it* happened, and so he did his best to wrap them all in the dust cloth. Then he, too, slipped under the cloth and lay down, curling himself round Maria and shutting his eyes tightly against the painful blue glare seeping through the uncovered door.

Maria turned her head to bring her lips close to his ear. "Maybe we should pray," she breathed. Her breath was raspy, her voice hoarse.

"Be with us," Pauly whispered.

"Now in the hour of Thy death," Maria finished. They said it over and over while time seemed to hold its breath. Pauly was aware only of the increasing cold and the now-sluggish beating of his heart against Maria's.

At last, at some hour between midnight and infinity, there was a flutterment and a scufflement outside—the bomber had returned for one last run. Pauly held Maria as tightly as he could. But the engine roar faltered and was sucked into another sound, one that started soft, soft, like windsong, like music, like a last breath. The great sigh welled out from Miss Potter's house and flooded the entire world.

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Pauly thought the sigh contained words—"I am worn," Miss Potter's far-off voice seemed to breathe, "to a ravelling . . ."

The sigh snuffed out the blue glamour.

"To a ravelling," came the echo. "To a ravelling . . ."

The echoes reached down into the Jacksons' mousehole, exploding it into darkness. Pauly found himself—the prince of falling stars—hurtling through space,

tumbling through starfields,
twisting end over end,
willing himself to believe in an afterlife . . .

Scrawny little greyfur naked thing
pink ears pink feet long whiskers
MOUSE
thuds onto cold ground
—blackness and cold powder explode all around—
confused (but remembers SNOW)
can't BREATHE—
scrabbles to feet
tail straight out in terror
eyes staring glaring not understanding
doesn't know father
grandfather
threehundredthgreatgrandfather—
hears . . . whimpering.

A thin wailing.

Someone, not himself, wailing in terror.

The young male mouse—a wild, nameless mouse—opens his eyes. The stab of pain from the reflection of light on white makes him blink and shake his head. He forces himself to look in all directions. Has he seen this winding path, this half-open gate, this snowy garden, this hulking, snow-mantled house before?

He is out of breath and trembling with fright, and he hasn't the least idea where he is or which way to go. Also he is very damp and cold with lying in the snow.

The sound—a terrified whimper—makes him look toward a small, crude building behind the house. He inches closer: one slow step, then another. There—in the shadows—he sees a female mouse, so thin she must be close to dying.

The continuous terrified moan seeps out of her, and she looks at him with huge, fright-filled eyes. She raises herself on her forelegs, and he

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can tell she has been lying right upon the top of four tiny babies, sheltering them beneath her. They lie motionless in the imprint her body has left in the snow. Their stiff postures, with awkwardly jutting legs and crumpled black toes, tell him they are dead.

The female stares at him. Her body shudders. She seems to fear him; he cannot imagine why. Suddenly she bolts into the shed, leaving the tiny brown bodies scattered behind. He can sense her watching warily from the shadows.

She's sick, he thinks, and probably crackbrained. He has no time to waste on her or her dead babies, when an entire world waits to be discovered!

He starts down the path—going lippity-lippity—not very fast, and looking all round. ●

cleaning out the attic . . .

. . . and I find old squid-tinted photographs
of the great and the great-great
and learn thereby
that I am descended
—and recently, it seems—
from a brief line
of **Homo sepians.**

—W. Gregory Stewart

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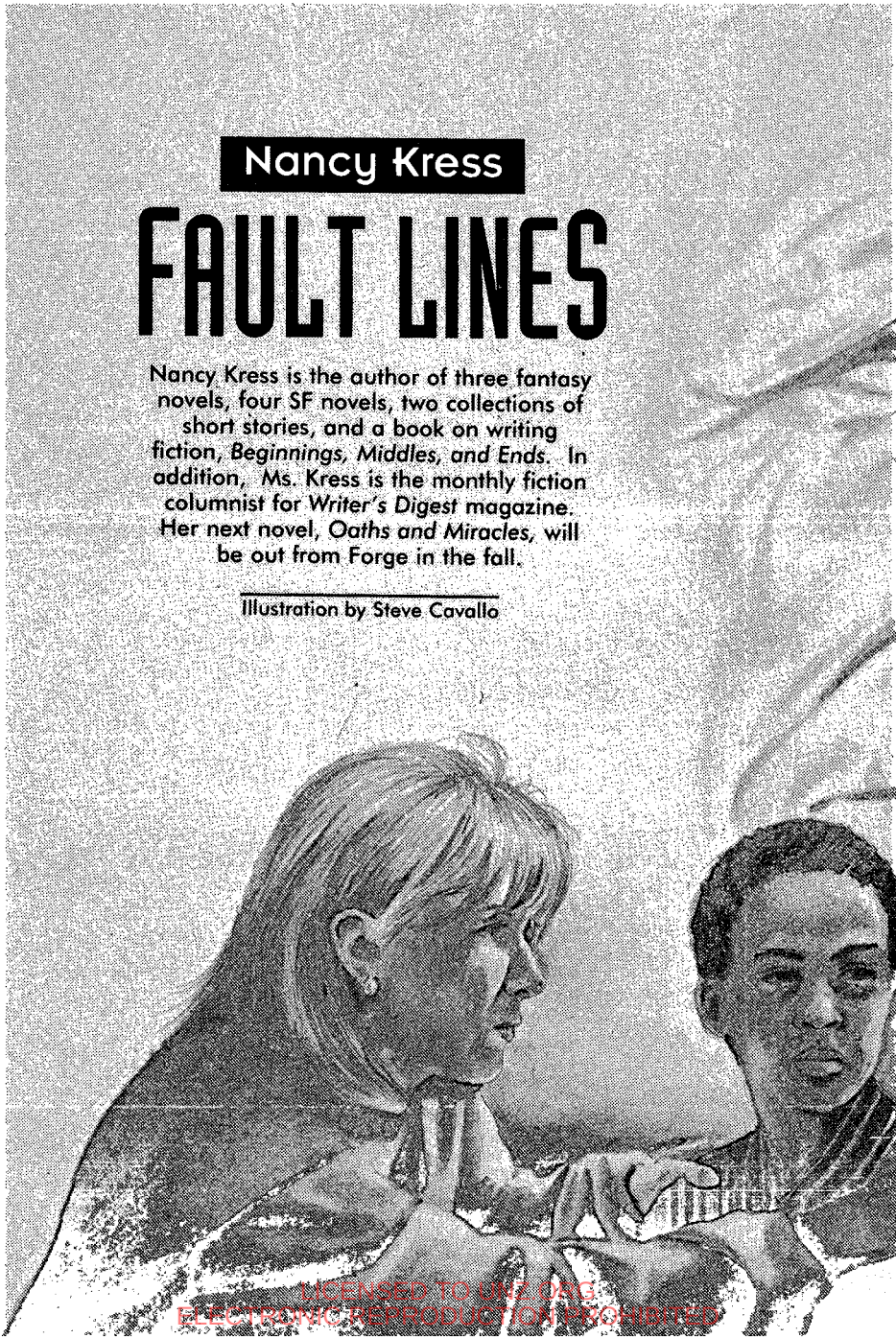
Nancy Kress

FAULT LINES

Nancy Kress is the author of three fantasy novels, four SF novels, two collections of short stories, and a book on writing fiction, *Beginnings, Middles, and Ends*. In addition, Ms. Kress is the monthly fiction columnist for *Writer's Digest* magazine. Her next novel, *Oaths and Miracles*, will be out from Forge in the fall.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



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"If the truth shall kill them, let them die."
—Immanuel Kant

The first day of school, we had assault-with-intent in Ms. Kelly's room. I was in my room next door, 136, laying down the law to 7C math. The usual first-day bullshit: turn in homework every day, take your assigned seat as soon as you walk in, don't bring a weapon or an abusive attitude into my classroom or you'll wish you'd never been born. The kids would ignore the first, do the others—for me anyway. Apparently not for Jenny Kelly.

"Mr. Shaunessy! Mr. Shaunessy! Come quick, they throwing chairs next door! The new teacher crying!" A pretty, tiny girl I recognized from last year: Lateesha Jefferson. Her round face glowed with excitement and satisfaction. A riot! Already! On the very first day!

I looked over my class slowly, penetratingly, letting my gaze linger on each upturned face. I took my time about it. Most kids dropped their eyes. Next door, something heavy hit the wall. I lowered my voice, so everybody had to strain to hear me.

"Nobody move while I'm gone. You all got that?"

Some heads nodded. Some kids stared back, uncertain but cool. A few boys smirked and I brought my unsmiling gaze to their faces until they stopped. Shouts filtered through the wall.

"Okay, Lateesha, tell Ms. Kelly I'm coming." She took off like a shot, grinning, Paul Revere in purple leggings and silver shoes.

I limped to the door and turned for a last look. My students all sat quietly, watching me. I saw Pedro Valesquez and Steven Cheung surreptiously scanning my jacket for the bulge of a service revolver that of course wasn't there. My reputation had become so inflated it rivaled the NYC budget. In the hall Lateesha screamed in a voice that could have deafened rock stars, "Mr. Shaunessy coming! You ho's better stop!"

In 134, two eighth-grade girls grappled in the middle of the floor. For a wonder, neither seemed to be armed, not even with keys. One girl's nose streamed blood. The other's blouse was torn. Both screamed incoherently, nonstop, like stuck sirens. Kids raced around the room. A chair had apparently been hurled at the chalkboard, or at somebody once standing in front of the chalkboard; chair and board had cracked. Jenny Kelly yelled and waved her arms. Lateesha was wrong; Ms. Kelly wasn't crying. But neither was she helping things a hell of a lot. A few kids on the perimeter of the chaos saw me and fell silent, curious to see what came next.

And then I saw Jeff Connors, leaning against the window wall, arms folded across his chest, and his expression as he watched the fighting girls told me everything I needed to know.

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I took a huge breath, letting it fill my lungs. I bellowed at top volume, and with no facial expression whatsoever, "Freeze! Now!"

And everybody did.

The kids who didn't know me looked instantly for the gun and the back-up. The kids who did know me grinned, stifled it, and nodded slightly. The two girls stopped pounding each other to twist toward the noise—my bellow had shivered the hanging fluorescents—which was time enough for me to limp across the floor, grab the girl on top, and haul her to her feet. She twisted to swing on me, thought better of it, and stood there, panting.

The girl on the floor whooped, leaped up, and tensed to slug the girl I held. But then she stopped. She didn't know me, but the scene had alerted her: nobody yelling anymore, the other wildcat quiet in my grip, nobody racing around the room. She glanced around, puzzled.

Jeff still leaned against the wall.

They expected me to say something. I said nothing, just stood there, impassive. Seconds dragged by. Fifteen, thirty, forty-five. To adults, that's a long time. To kids, it's forever. The adrenaline ebbs away.

A girl in the back row sat down at her desk.

Another followed.

Pretty soon they were all sitting down, quiet, not exactly intimidated but interested. This was different, and different was cool. Only the two girls were left, and Jeff Connors leaning on the window, and a small Chinese kid whose chair was probably the one hurled at the chalkboard. I saw that the crack ran right through words printed neatly in green marker:

Ms. Kelly
English 8E

After a minute, the Chinese kid without a chair sat on his desk.

Still I said nothing. Another minute dragged past. The kids were uneasy now. Lateesha said helpfully, "Them girls supposed to go to the nurse, Mr. Shaunessy. Each one by they own self."

I kept my grip on the girl with the torn blouse. The other girl, her nose gushing blood, suddenly started to cry. She jammed her fist against her mouth and ran out of the room.

I looked at each face, one at a time.

Eventually I released my grip on the second girl and nodded at Lateesha. "You go with her to the nurse."

Lateesha jumped up eagerly, a girl with a mission, the only one I'd spoken to. "You come on, honey," she said, and led away the second girl, clucking at her under her breath.

Now they were all eager for the limelight. Rosaria said quickly, "They fighting over Jeff, Mr. Shaunessy."

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"No they ain't," said a big, muscled boy in the second row. He was scowling. "They fighting cause Jonelle, she dissed Lisa."

"No, they—"

Everybody had a version. They all jumped in, intellectuals with theories, arguing with each other until they saw I wasn't saying anything, wasn't trying to sort through it, wasn't going to participate. One by one, they fell silent again, curious.

Finally Jeff himself spoke. He looked at me with his absolutely open, earnest, guileless expression and said, "It was them suicides, Mr. Shaunessy."

The rest of the class looked slightly confused, but willing to go along with this. They knew Jeff. But now Ms. Kelly, excluded for five full minutes from her own classroom, jumped in. She was angry. "*What* suicides? What are you talking about, uh . . . "

Jeff didn't deign to supply his name. She was supposed to know it. He spoke directly to me. "Them old people. The ones who killed theirselves in that hospital this morning. And last week. In the newspaper."

I didn't react. Just waited.

"You know, Mr. Shaunessy," Jeff went on, in that same open, confiding tone. "Them old people shooting and hanging and pushing theirselves out of windows. At their age. In their sixties and seventies and eighties." He shook his head regretfully.

The other kids were nodding now, although I'd bet my pension none of them ever read anything in any newspaper.

"It just ain't no example to us," Jeff said regretfully. "If even the people who are getting three good meals a day and got people waiting on them and don't have to work or struggle no more with the man—if *they* give up, how we supposed to think there's anything in this here life for us?"

He leaned back against the window and grinned at me: triumphant, regretful, pleading, an inheritor of a world he hadn't made. His classmates glanced at each other sideways, glanced at me, and stopped grinning.

"A tragedy, that's what it is," Jeff said, shaking his head. "A tragedy. All them old people, deciding a whole life just don't make it worth it to stick to the rules. How *we* supposed to learn to behave?"

"You have to get control of Jeff Connors," I told Jenny Kelly at lunch in the faculty room. This was an exposed-pipes, flaking-plaster oasis in the basement of Benjamin Franklin Junior High. Teachers sat jammed together on folding metal chairs around brown formica tables, drinking coffee and eating out of paper bags. Ms. Kelly had plopped down next to me and practically demanded advice. "That's actually not as hard as it

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might look. Jeff's a hustler, an operator, and the others follow him. But he's not uncontrollable."

"Easy for you to say," she retorted, surprising me. "They look at you and see the macho ex-cop who weighs what? Two-thirty? Who took out three criminals before you got shot, and has strong juice at Juvenile Hall. They look at me and see a five-foot-three, one-hundred-twenty-pound nobody they can all push around. Including Jeff."

"So don't let him," I said, wondering how she'd heard all the stories about me so fast. She'd only moved into the district four days ago.

She took a healthy bite of her cheese sandwich. Although she'd spent the first half of the lunch period in the ladies' room, I didn't see any tear marks. Maybe she fixed her makeup to cover tear stains. Margie used to do that. Up close Jenny Kelly looked older than I'd thought at first: twenty-eight, maybe thirty. Her looks weren't going to make it any easier to control a roomful of thirteen-year-old boys. She pushed her short blond hair off her face and looked directly at me.

"Do you really carry a gun?"

"Of course not. Board of Education regs forbid any weapons by anybody on school property. You know that."

"The kids think you carry."

I shrugged.

"And you don't tell them otherwise."

I shrugged again.

"Okay, I can't do that either," she said. "But I'm not going to fail at this, Gene. I'm just not. You're a big success here, everybody says so. So tell me what I *can* do to keep enough control of my classes that I have a remote chance of actually teaching anybody anything."

I studied her, and revised my first opinion, which was that she'd be gone by the end of September. No tear stains, not fresh out of college, able to keep eating under stress. The verbal determination I discounted; I'd heard a lot of verbal determination from rookies when I was on the Force, and most of it melted away three months out of Police Academy. Even sooner in the City School District.

"You need to do two things," I said. "First, recognize that these kids can't do without connection to other human beings. Not for five minutes, not for one minute. They're starved for it. And to most of them, 'connection' means arguing, fighting, struggling, even abuse. It's what they're used to, and it's what they'll naturally create, because it feels better to them than existing alone in a social vacuum for even a minute. To compete with that, to get them to disengage from each other long enough to listen to you, you have to give them an equally strong connection to *you*. It doesn't have to be intimidation, or some bullshit fantasy about going up against the law. You can find your own way. But unless you're a

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strong presence—very strong, very distinctive—of one kind or another, they're going to ignore you and go back to connecting with each other."

"Connection," she said, thinking about it. "What about connecting to the material? English literature has some pretty exciting stuff in it, you know."

"I'll take your word for it. But no books are exciting to most of these kids. Not initially. They can only connect to the material through a person. They're that starved."

She took another bite of sandwich. "And the second thing?"

"I already told you. Get control of Jeff Connors. Immediately."

"Who is he? And what was all that bullshit about old people killing themselves?"

I said, "Didn't you see it on the news?"

"Of course I did. The police are investigating, aren't they? But what did it have to do with my classroom?"

"Nothing. It was a diversionary tactic. A cover-up."

"Of what?"

"Could be a lot of things. Jeff will use whatever he hears to confuse and mislead, and he hears everything. He's bright, unmotivated, a natural leader, and—unbelievably—not a gang member. You saw him—no big gold, no beeper. His police record is clean. So far, anyway."

Jenny said, "You worked with him a little last year."

"No, I didn't work with him. I controlled him in class, was all." She'd been asking about me.

"So if *you* didn't really connect with him, how do I?"

"I can't tell you that," I said, and we ate in silence for a few minutes. It didn't feel strained. She looked thoughtful, turning over what I'd told her. I wondered suddenly whether she'd have made a good cop. Her ears were small, I noticed, and pink, with tiny gold earrings in the shape of little shells.

She caught me looking, and smiled, and glanced at my left hand.

So whoever she'd asked about me hadn't told her everything. I gulped my last bite of sandwich, nodded, and went back to my room before 7H came thundering up the stairs, their day almost over, one more crazy period where Mr. Shaunessy actually expected them to pay attention to some weird math instead of their natural, intense, contentious absorption in each other.

Two more elderly people committed suicide, at the Angels of Mercy Nursing Home on Amsterdam Avenue.

I caught it on the news, while correcting 7H's first-day quiz to find out how much math they remembered from last year. They didn't remember

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squat. My shattered knee was propped up on the hassock beside the bones and burial tray of a Hungry Man Extra-Crispy Fried Chicken.

". . . identified as Giacomo della Francesca, seventy-eight, and Lydia Smith, eighty. The two occupied rooms on the same floor, according to nursing home staff, and both had been in fairly good spirits. Mrs. Smith, a widow, threw herself from the roof of the eight-story building. Mr. della Francesca, who was found dead in his room, had apparently stabbed himself. The suicides follow very closely on similar deaths this morning at the Beth Israel Retirement Home on West End Avenue. However, Captain Michael Doyle, NYPD, warned against premature speculation about—"

I shifted my knee. This Captain Doyle must be getting nervous; this was the third pair of self-inflicted fatalities in nursing homes within ten days. Old people weren't usually susceptible to copy-cat suicides. Pretty soon the *Daily News* or the *Post* would decide that there was actually some nut running around Manhattan knocking off the elderly. Or that there was a medical conspiracy backed by Middle East terrorists and extraterrestrials. Whatever the tabloids chose, the NYPD would end up taking the blame.

Suddenly I knew, out of nowhere, that Margie was worse.

I get these flashes like that, out of nowhere, and I hate it. I never used to. I used to know things the way normal people know things, by seeing them or reading them or hearing them or reasoning them through. Ways that made sense. Now, for the last year, I get these flashes of knowing things some other way, thoughts just turning up in my mind, and the intuitions are mostly right. Mostly right, and nearly always bad.

This wasn't one of my nights to go to the hospital. But I flicked off the TV, limped to the trash to throw away my dinner tray, and picked up the cane I use when my leg has been under too much physical stress. The phone rang. I paused to listen to the answering machine, just in case it was Libby calling from Cornell to tell me about her first week of classes.

"Gene, this is Vince Romano." Pause. "Bucky." Pause. "I know it's been a long time."

I sat down slowly on the hassock.

"Listen, I was sorry to hear about Margie. I was going to . . . you were . . . it wasn't. . . ." Despite myself, I had to grin. People didn't change. Bucky Romano never could locate a complete verb.

He finished floundering. ". . . to say how sorry I am. But that's not why I'm calling." Long pause. "I need to talk to you. It's important. Very important." Pause. "It's not about Father Healey again, or any of that old . . . something else entirely." Pause. "Very important, Gene. I can't

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. . . it isn't . . you won't . . . " Pause. Then his voice changed, became stronger. "I can't do this alone, Gene."

Bucky had never been able to do anything alone. Not when we were six, not when we were eleven, not when we were seventeen, not when he was twenty-three and it wasn't any longer me but Father Healey who decided what he did. Not when he was twenty-seven and it was me again deciding for him, more unhappy about that than I'd ever been about anything in my life until Margie's accident.

Bucky recited his phone number, but he didn't hang up. I could hear him breathing. Suddenly I could almost see him, somewhere out there, sitting with the receiver pressed so close to his mouth that it would look like he was trying to swallow it. Hoping against hope that I might pick up the phone after all. Worrying the depths of his skinny frantic soul for what words he could say to make me do this.

"Gene . . . it's about . . . I shouldn't say this, but after all you're a . . . were a . . . it's about those elderly deaths." Pause. "I work at Kelvin Pharmaceutical now." And then the click.

What the hell could anybody make of any of that?

I limped to the elevator and caught a cab to St. Clare's Hospital.

Margie *was* worse, although the only way I could tell was that there was one more tube hooked to her than there'd been last night. She lay in bed in the same position she'd lain in for eighteen months and seven days: curled head to knees, splinter-thin arms bent at the elbows. She weighed ninety-nine pounds. Gastrostomy and catheter tubes ran into her, and now an IV drip on a pole as well. Her beautiful brown hair, worn away a bit at the back of her head from constant contact with the pillow, was dull. Its sheen, like her life, had faded deep inside its brittle shafts, unrecoverable.

"Hello, Margie. I'm back."

I eased myself into the chair, leg straight out in front of me.

"Libby hasn't called yet. First week of classes, schedule to straighten out, old friends to see—you know how it is." Margie always had. I could see her and Libby shopping the week before Libby's freshman year, laughing over the Gap bags, quarreling over the price of something I'd buy either of them now, no matter what it cost. Anything.

"It's pretty cool out for September, sweetheart. But the leaves haven't changed yet. I walked across the Park just yesterday—all still green. Composing myself for today. Which wasn't too bad. It's going to be a good school year, I think."

Have a great year! Margie always said to me on the first day of school, as if the whole year would be compressed in that first six hours and twenty minutes. For three years she'd said it, the three years since I'd

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been retired from the Force and limped into a career as a junior-high teacher. I remembered her standing at the door, half-dressed for her secretarial job at Time-Warner, her silk blouse stretched across those generous breasts, the slip showing underneath. *Have a great day! Have a great five minutes!*

"Last-period 7H looks like a zoo, Margie. But when doesn't last period look like a zoo? They're revved up like Ferraris by then. But both algebra classes look good, and there's a girl in 7A whose transcript is incredible. I mean, we're talking future Westinghouse Talent winner here."

Talk to her, the doctor had said. *We don't know what coma patients can and cannot hear.* That had been a year and a half ago. Nobody ever said it to me now. But I couldn't stop.

"There's a new sacrificial lamb in the room next to mine, eighth-grade English. She had a cat fight in there today. But I don't know, she might have more grit than she looks. And guess who called. Bucky Romano. After all this time. Thirteen years. He wants me to give him a call. I'm not sure yet."

Her teeth gapped and stuck out. The anti-seizure medication in her gastrostomy bag made the gum tissue grow too much. It displaced her teeth.

"I finally bought curtains for the kitchen. Like Libby nagged me to. Although they'll probably have to wait until she comes home at Thanksgiving to get hung. Yellow. You'd like them."

Margie had never seen this kitchen. I could see her in the dining room of the house I'd sold, up on a chair hanging drapes, rubbing at a dirty spot on the window. . . .

"Gene?"

"Hi, Susan." The shift nurse looked as tired as I'd ever seen her. "What's this new tube in Margie?"

"Antibiotics. She was having a little trouble breathing, and an X-ray showed a slight pneumonia. It'll clear right up on medication. Gene, you have a phone call."

Something clutched in my chest. *Libby.* Ever since that '93 Lincoln had torn through a light on Lexington while Margie crossed with a bag of groceries, any phone call in an unexpected place does that to me. I limped to the nurses' station.

"Gene? This is Vince. Romano. Bucky."

"Bucky."

"I'm sorry to bother you at . . . I was so sorry to hear about Margie, I left a message on your machine but maybe you haven't been home to . . . listen, I need to see you, Gene. It's important. Please."

"It's late, Bucky. I have to teach tomorrow. I teach now, at—"

"Please. You'll know why when I see you. I have to see you."

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I closed my eyes. "Look, I'm pretty tired. Maybe another time."

"Please, Gene. Just for a few minutes. I can be at your place in fifteen minutes!"

Bucky had never minded begging. I remembered that, now. Suddenly I didn't want him to see where I lived, how I lived, without Margie. What I really wanted was to tell him "no." But I couldn't. I never had, not our whole lives, and I couldn't now—why not? I didn't know.

"All right, Bucky. A few minutes. I'll meet you in the lobby here at St. Clare's."

"Fifteen minutes. God, thanks, Gene. Thanks so much, I really appreciate it, I need to—"

"Okay."

"See you soon."

He didn't mind begging, and he made people help him. Even Father Healey had found out that. Coming in to Bucky's life, and going out.

The lobby of St. Clare's never changed. Same scuffed green floor, slashed gray vinyl couches mended with wide tape, information-desk attendant who looked like he could have been a bouncer at Madison Square Garden. Maybe he had. Tired people yelled and whispered in Spanish, Greek, Korean, Chinese. Statues of the Madonna and St. Clare and the crucified Christ beamed a serenity as alien here as money.

Bucky and I grew up in next-door apartments in a neighborhood like this one, a few blocks from Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows. That's how we defined our location: "two doors down from the crying Broad." We made our First Communion together, and our Confirmation, and Bucky was best man when I married Marge. But by that time he'd entered the seminary, and any irreverence about Our Lady had disappeared, along with all other traces of humor, humility, or humanity. Or so I thought then. Maybe I wasn't wrong. Even though he always made straight A's in class, Bucky-as-priest-in-training was the same as Bucky-as-shortstop or Bucky-as-third-clarinet or Bucky-as-altar-boy: intense, committed, short-sightedly wrong.

He'd catch a high pop and drop it. He'd know "Claire de Lune"perfectly, and be half a beat behind. Teeth sticking out, skinny face furrowed in concentration, he'd bend over the altar rail and become so enraptured by whatever he saw there that he'd forget to make the response. We boys would nudge each other and grin, and later howl at him in the parking lot.

But his decision to leave the priesthood wasn't a howler. It wasn't even a real decision. He vacillated for months, growing thinner and more stuttery, and finally he'd taken a bottle of pills and a half pint of vodka.

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Father Healey and I found him, and had his stomach pumped, and Father Healey tried to talk him back into the seminary and the saving grace of God. From his hospital bed Bucky had called me, stuttering in his panic, to come get him and take him home. He was terrified. Not of the hospital—of Father Healey.

And I had, coming straight from duty, secure in my shield and gun and Margie's love and my beautiful young daughter and my contempt for the weakling who needed a lapsed-Catholic cop to help him face an old priest in a worn-out religion. God, I'd been smug.

"Gene?" Bucky said. "Gene Shaunessy?"

I looked up at the faded lobby of St. Clare's.

"Hello, Bucky."

"God, you look . . . I can't . . . you haven't changed a bit!"

Then he started to cry.

I got him to a Greek place around the corner on Ninth. The dinner trade was mostly over and we sat at a table in the shadows, next to a dirty side window with a view of a brick alley, Bucky with his back to the door. Not that he cared if anybody saw him crying. I cared. I ordered two beers.

"Okay, what is it?"

He blew his nose and nodded gratefully. "Same old Gene. You always just . . . never any . . . "

"Bucky. What the fuck is wrong?"

He said, unexpectedly, "You hate this."

Over his shoulder, I eyed the door. Starting eighteen months ago, I'd had enough tears and drama to last me the rest of my life, although I wasn't going to tell Bucky that. If he didn't get it over with. . . .

"I work at Kelvin Pharmaceuticals," Bucky said, suddenly calmer. "After I left seminary, after Father Healey . . . you remember . . . "

"Go on," I said, more harshly than I'd intended. Father Healey and I had screamed at each other outside Bucky's door at St. Vincent's, while Bucky's stomach was being pumped. I'd said things I didn't want to remember.

"I went back to school. Took a B.S. in chemistry. Then a Ph.D. You and I, about that time of . . . I wanted to call you after you were shot but. . . I could have tried harder to find you earlier, I know . . . anyway. I went to work for Kelvin, in the research department. Liked it. I met Tommy. We live together."

He'd never said. But, then, he'd never had to. And there hadn't been very much saying anyway, not back then, and certainly not at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows.

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"I liked the work at Kelvin. Like it. Liked it." He took a deep breath. "I worked on Camineur. You take it, don't you, Gene?"

I almost jumped out of my skin. "How'd you know that?"

He grinned. "Not by any medical record hacking. Calm down, it isn't. . . people can't tell. I just guessed, from the profile."

He meant *my* profile. Camineur is something called a neurotransmitter uptake-regulator. Unlike Prozac and the other antidepressants that were its ancestors, it fiddles not just with serotonin levels but also with norepinephrine and dopamine and a half dozen other brain chemicals. It was prescribed for me after Marge's accident. Non-addictive, no bad side effects, no dulling of the mind. Without it, I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't concentrate. Couldn't stop wanting to kill somebody every time I walked into St. Clare's.

I had found myself in a gun shop on Avenue D, trigger-testing a nine-millimeter, which felt so light in my hand it floated. When I looked at the thoughts in my head, I went to see Margie's doctor.

Bucky said, quietly for once, "Camineur was designed to prevent violent ideation in people with strong but normally controlled violent impulses, whose control has broken down under severe life stress. It's often prescribed for cops. Also military careerists and doctors. Types with compensated paranoia restrained by strong moral strictures. Nobody told you that the Camineur generation of mood inhibitors was that specific?"

If they did, I hadn't been listening. I hadn't been listening to much in those months. But I heard Bucky now. His hesitations disappeared when he talked about his work.

"It's a good drug, Gene. You don't have to feel . . . there isn't anything shameful about taking it. It just restores the brain chemistry to whatever it was before the trauma."

I scowled, and gestured for two more beers.

"All right. I didn't mean to . . . There's been several generations of neural pharmaceuticals since then. And that's why I'm talking to you."

I sipped my second beer, and watched Bucky drain his.

"Three years ago we . . . there was a breakthrough in neuropharm research, really startling stuff, I won't go into the . . . we started a whole new line of development. I was on the team. Am. On the team."

I waited. Sudden raindrops, large and sparse, struck the dirty window.

"Since Camineur, we've narrowed down the effects of neuropharms spectacularly. I don't know how much you know about this, but the big neurological discovery in the last five years is that repeated intense emotion doesn't just alter the synaptic pathways in the brain. It actually changes your brain structure from the cellular level up. With any intense experience, new structures start to be built, and if the experience is repeated, they get reinforced. The physical changes can make you, say,

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more open to risk-taking, or calmer in the face of stress. Or the physical structures that get built can make it hard or even impossible to function normally, even if you're trying with all your will. In other words, your life literally makes you crazy."

He smiled. I said nothing.

"What we've learned is how to affect only those pathways created by depression, only those created by fear, only those created by narcissistic rage . . . we don't touch your memories. They're there. You can see them, in your mind, like billboards. But now you drive past them, not through them. In an emotional sense."

Bucky peered at me. I said, not gently, "So what pills do *you* take to drive past your memories?"

He laughed. "I don't." I stayed impassive but he said hastily anyway, "Not that people who do are . . . it isn't a sign of weakness to take neuropharms, Gene. Or a sign of strength not to. I just . . . it isn't . . . I was waiting, was all. I was waiting."

"For what? Your prince to come?" I was still angry.

He said simply, "Yes."

Slowly I lowered my beer. But Bucky returned to his background intelligence.

"This drug my team is working on now . . . the next step was to go beyond just closing down negative pathways. Take, as just one example, serotonin. Some researcher said . . . there's one theory that serotonin, especially, is like cops. Having enough of it in your cerebral chemistry keep riots and looting and assault in the brain from getting out of control. But just holding down crime doesn't, all by itself, create prosperity or happiness. Or joy. For that, you need a new class of neuropharms that create positive pathways. Or at least strengthen those that are already there."

"Cocaine," I said. "Speed. Gin and tonic."

"No, no. Not a rush of power. Not a temporary high. Not temporary at all, and not isolating. The neural pathways that make people feel . . . the ones that let you . . . " He leaned toward me, elbows on the table. "Weren't there moments, Gene, when you felt so close to Margie it was like you crawled inside her skin for a minute? Like you *were* Margie?"

I looked at the window. Raindrops slid slowly down the dirty glass, streaking it dirtier. In the alley, a homeless prowled the garbage cans. "What's this got to do with the elderly suicides? If you have a point to make, make it."

"They weren't suicides. They were murders."

"Murders? Some psycho knocking off old people? What makes you think so?"

"Not some psycho. And I don't think so. I *know*."

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"How?"

"All eight elderlies were taking J-24. That's the Kelvin code name for the neuropharm that ends situational isolation. It was a clinical trial."

I studied Bucky, whose eyes burned with Bucky light: intense, pleading, determined, inept. And something else, something that hadn't been there in the old days. "Bucky, that makes no sense. The NYPD isn't perfect, God knows, but they can tell the difference between suicide and murder. And anyway, the suicide rate rises naturally among old people, they get depressed—" I stopped. He had to already know this.

"That's just it!" Bucky cried, and an old Greek couple at a table halfway across the room turned to stare at him. He lowered his voice. "The elderly in the clinical trial *weren't* depressed. They were very carefully screened for it. No psychological, chemical, or social markers for depression. These were the . . . when you see old people in travel ads, doing things, full of life and health, playing tennis and dancing by candlelight . . . the team psychologists looked for our clinical subjects very carefully. *None* of them was depressed!"

"So maybe your pill made them depressed. Enough to kill themselves."

"No! No! J-24 couldn't . . . there wasn't any . . . it didn't make them depressed. I saw it." He hesitated. "And besides . . . "

"Besides what?"

He looked out at the alley. A waiter pushed a trolley of dirty dishes past our table. When Bucky spoke again, his voice sounded odd.

"I gave five intense years to J-24 and the research that led to it, Gene. Days, evenings, weekends—eighty hours a week in the lab. Every minute until I met Tommy, and maybe too much time even after that. I know everything that the Kelvin team leaders know, everything that *can* be known about that drug's projected interaction with existing neurotransmitters. J-24 was my life."

As the Church had once been. Bucky couldn't do anything by halves. I wondered just what his position on "the team" had actually been.

He said, "We designed J-24 to combat the isolation that even normal, healthy people feel with age. You get old. Your friends die. Your mate dies. Your children live in another state, with lives of their own. All the connections you built up over decades are gone, and in healthy people, those connections created very thick, specific, strong neural structures. Any new friends you make in a nursing home or retirement community—there just aren't the years left to duplicate the strength of those neural pathways. Even when outgoing, undepressed, risk-taking elderlies try."

I didn't say anything.

"J-24 was specific to the neurochemistry of connection. You took it in the presence of someone else, and it opened the two of you up to each

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other, made it possible to genuinely—*genuinely*, at the permanent chemical level—imprint on each other."

"You created an *aphrodisiac for geezers?*"

"No," he said, irritated. "Sex had nothing to do with it. Those impulses originate in the limbic system. This was . . . emotional bonding. Of the most intense, long-term type. Don't tell me all you ever felt for Margie was sex!"

After a minute he said, "I'm sorry."

"Finish your story."

"It *is* finished. We gave the drug to four sets of volunteers, all people who had long-term terminal diseases but weren't depressed, people who were willing to take risks in order to enhance the quality of their own perceptions in the time left. I was there observing when they took it. They bonded like baby ducks imprinting on the first moving objects they see. No, not like that. More like . . . like . . . " He looked over my shoulder, at the wall, and his eyes filled with water. I glanced around to make sure nobody noticed.

"Giacomo della Francesca and Lydia Smith took J-24 together almost a month ago. They were transformed by this incredible joy in each other. In knowing each other. Not each other's memories, but each other's . . . souls. They talked, and held hands, and you could just feel that they were completely open to each other, without all the psychological defenses we use to keep ourselves walled off. They knew each other. They almost *were* each other."

I was embarrassed by the look on his face. "But they didn't know each other like that, Bucky. It was just an illusion."

"No. It wasn't. Look, what happens when you connect with someone, share something intense with them?"

I didn't want to have this conversation. But Bucky didn't really need me to answer; he rolled on all by himself, unstoppable.

"What happens when you connect is that you exhibit greater risk taking, with fewer inhibitions. You exhibit greater empathy, greater attention, greater receptivity to what is being said, greater pleasure. And *all* of those responses are neurochemical, which in turn create, reinforce, or diminish physical structures in the brain. J-24 just reverses the process. Instead of the experience causing the neurochemical response, J-24 supplies the physical changes that create the experience. And that's not all. The drug boosts the *rate* of structural change, so that every touch, every word exchanged, every emotional response, reinforces neural pathways one or two hundred times as much as a normal life encounter."

I wasn't sure how much of this I believed. "And so you say you gave it to four old couples . . . does it only work on men and women?"

A strange look passed swiftly over his face: secretive, almost pained.

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I remembered Tommy. "That's all who have tried it so far. Can you . . . have you ever thought about what it would be like to be really merged, to know him, to be him—think of it, Gene! I could—"

"I don't want to hear about that," I said harshly. Libby would hate that answer. My liberal, tolerant daughter. But I'd been a cop. Lingering homophobia went with the territory, even if I wasn't exactly proud of it. Whatever Bucky's fantasies were about him and Tommy, I didn't want to know.

Bucky didn't look offended. "All right. But just imagine—an end to the terrible isolation that we live in our whole tiny lives. . . ." He looked at the raindrops sliding down the window.

"And you think somebody murdered those elderly for that? Who? Why?"

"I don't know."

"Bucky. Think. This doesn't make any sense. A drug company creates a . . . what did you call it? A neuropharm. They get it into clinical trials, under FDA supervision—"

"No," Bucky said.

I stared at him.

"It would have taken years. Maybe decades. It's too radical a departure. So Kelvin—"

"You knew there was no approval."

"Yes. But I thought . . . I never thought . . . " He looked at me, and suddenly I had another one of those unlogical flashes, and I saw there was more wrong here even than Bucky was telling me. He believed that he'd participated, in whatever small way, in creating a drug that led someone to murder eight old people. Never mind if it was true—Bucky believed it. He believed this same company was covering its collective ass by calling the deaths depressive suicides, when they could not have been suicides. And yet Bucky sat in front of me without chewing his nails to the knuckles, or pulling out his hair, or hating himself. Bucky, to whom guilt was the staff of life.

I'd seen him try to kill himself over leaving the Church. I'd watched him go through agonies of guilt over ignoring answering-machine messages from Father Healey. Hell, I'd watched him shake and cry because at ten years old we'd stolen three apples from a market on Columbus Avenue. Yet there he sat, disturbed but coherent. For Bucky, even serene. Believing he'd contributed to murder.

I said, "What neuropharms do you take, Bucky?"

"I told you. None."

"None at all?"

"No." His brown eyes were completely honest. "Gene, I want you to

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find out how these clinical subjects really died. You have access to NYPD records—"

"Not any more."

"But you *know* people. And cases get buried there all the time, you used to tell me that yourself, with enough money you can buy yourself an investigation unless somebody high up in the city is really out to get you. Kelvin Pharmaceuticals doesn't have those kinds of enemies. They're not the Mob. They're just . . . "

"Committing murder to cover up an illegal drug trial? I don't buy it, Bucky."

"Then find out what *really* happened."

I shot back, "What do *you* think happened?"

"I don't know! But I do know this drug is a good thing! Don't you understand, it holds out the possibility of a perfect, totally open connection with the person you love most in the world. . . . Find out what happened, Gene. It wasn't suicide. J-24 doesn't cause depression. I *know* it. And for this drug to be denied people would be . . . it would be a sin."

He said it so simply, so naturally, that I was thrown all over again. This wasn't Bucky, as I had known him. Or maybe it was. He was still driven by sin and love.

I stood and put money on the table. "I don't want to get involved in this, Bucky. I really don't. But—one thing more—"

"Yeah?"

"Camineur. Can it . . . does it account for . . ." Jesus, I sounded like him. "I get these flashes of intuition about things I've been thinking about. Sometimes it's stuff I didn't know."

He nodded. "You knew the stuff before. You just didn't know you knew. Camineur strengthens intuitive right-brain pathways. As an effect of releasing the stranglehold of violent thoughts. You're more distanced from compulsive thoughts of destruction, but also more likely to make connections among various non-violent perceptions. You're just more intuitive, Gene, now that you're less driven."

And I'm less Gene, my unwelcome intuition said. I gazed down at Bucky, sitting there with his skinny fingers splayed on the table, an unBucky-like serenity weirdly mixed with his manic manner and his belief that he worked for a corporation that had murdered eight people. Who the hell was *he?*

"I don't want to get involved in this," I repeated.

"But you will," Bucky said, and in his words I heard utter, unshakable faith.

Jenny Kelly said, "I set up a conference with Jeff Connors and he never showed." It was Friday afternoon. She had deep circles around her eyes.

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Raccoon eyes, we called them. They were the badge of teachers who were new, dedicated, or crazy. Who sat up until 1:00 A.M. in a frenzy of lesson planning and paper correcting, and then arrived at school at 6:30 A.M. to supervise track or meet with students or correct more papers.

"Set up another conference," I suggested. "Sometimes by the third or fourth missed appointment, guilt drives them to show up."

She nodded. "Okay. Meanwhile, Jeff has my class all worked up over something called the Neighborhood Safety Information Network, where they're supposed to inform on their friends' brothers' drug activity, or something. It's somehow connected to getting their Social Services checks. It's got the kids all in an uproar . . . I sent seventeen kids to the principal in three days."

"You might want to ease up on that, Jenny. It gives everybody—kids and administration—the idea that you can't control your own classroom."

"I can't," she said, so promptly and honestly that I had to smile. "But I *will*."

"Well, good luck."

"Listen, Gene, I'm picking the brains of everybody I can get to talk to me about this. Want to go have a cup of coffee someplace?"

"Sorry."

"Okay." She didn't looked rebuffed, which was a relief. Today her earrings matched the color of her sweater. A soft blue, with lace at the neck. "Maybe another time."

"Maybe." It was easier than an outright no.

Crossing the parking lot to my car, I saw Jeff Connors. He slapped me a high-five. "Ms. Kelly's looking for you, Jeff."

"She is? Oh, yeah. Well, I can't today. Busy."

"So I hear. There isn't any such thing as the Neighborhood Safety Information Network, is there?"

He eyed me carefully. "Sure there is, Mr. S."

"Really? Well, I'm going to be at Midtown South station house this afternoon. I'll ask about it."

"It's, like, kinda new. They maybe don't know nothing about it yet."

"Ah. Well, I'll ask anyway. See you around, Jeff."

"Hang loose."

He watched my car all the way down the block, until I turned the corner.

The arrest room at Midtown South was full of cops filling out forms: fingerprint cards, On-line Booking System Arrest Worksheets, complaint reports, property invoices, requests for laboratory examinations of evidence, Arrest Documentation Checklists. The cops, most of whom had changed out of uniform, scribbled and muttered and sharpened pencils.

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In the holding pen alleged criminals cursed and slept and muttered and sang. It looked like fourth-period study hall in the junior-high cafeteria.

I said, "Lieutenant Fermato?"

A scribbling cop in a Looney Tunes sweatshirt waved me toward an office without even looking up.

"Oh my God. Gene Shaunessy. Risen from the fuckin' dead."

"Hello, Johnny."

"Come *in*. God, you look like a politician. Teaching must be the soft life."

"Better to put on a few pounds than look like a starved rat."

We stood there clasping hands, looking at each other, not saying the things that didn't need saying anyway, even if we'd had the words, which we didn't. Johnny and I had been partners for seven years. We'd gone together through foot pursuits and high-speed chases and lost files and violent domestics and bungled traps by Internal Affairs and robberies-in-progress and the grueling boredom of the street. Johnny's divorce. My retirement. Johnny had gone into Narcotics a year before I took the hit that shattered my knee. If he'd been my partner, it might not have happened. He'd made lieutenant only a few months ago. I hadn't seen him in a year and a half.

Suddenly I knew—or the Camineur knew—why I'd come to Midtown South to help Bucky after all. I'd already lost too many pieces of my life. Not the life I had now—the life I'd had once. My real one.

"Gene—about Marge . . . "

I held up my hand. "Don't. I'm here about something else. Professional."

His voice changed. "You in trouble?"

"No. A friend is." Johnny didn't know Bucky; they'd been separate pieces of my old life. I couldn't picture them in the same room together for more than five minutes. "It's about the suicides at the Angels of Mercy Nursing Home. Giacomo della Francesca and Lydia Smith."

Johnny nodded. "What about it?"

"I'd like to see a copy of the initial crime-scene report."

Johnny looked at me steadily. But all he said was, "Not my jurisdiction, Gene."

I looked back. If Johnny didn't want to get me the report, he wouldn't. But either way, he *could*. Johnny'd been the best undercover cop in Manhattan, mostly because he was so good at putting together his net of criminal informers, inside favors, noncriminal spies, and unseen procedures. I didn't believe he'd dismantled any of it just because he'd come in off the street. Not Johnny.

"Is it important?"

I said, "It's important."

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"All right," he said, and that was all that had to be said. I asked him instead about the Neighborhood Safety Information Network.

"We heard about that one," Johnny said. "Pure lies, but somebody's using it to stir up a lot of anti-cop crap as a set-up for something or other. We're watching it."

"Watches run down," I said, because it was an old joke between us, and Johnny laughed. Then we talked about old times, and Libby, and his two boys, and when I left, the same cops were filling out the same forms and the same perps were still sleeping or cursing or singing, nobody looking at each other in the whole damn place.

By the next week, the elderly suicides had disappeared from the papers, which had moved on to another batch of mayhem and alleged brutality in the three-oh. Jenny Kelly had two more fights in her classroom. One I heard through the wall and broke up myself. The other Lateesha told me about in the parking lot. "That boy, Mr. Shaunessy, that Richie Tang, he call Ms. Kelly an ugly bitch! He say she be sorry for messing with *him!*"

"And then what?" I said, reluctantly.

Lateesha smiled. "Ms. Kelly, she yell back that Richie might act like a lost cause but he ain't lost to *her,* and she be damned if anybody gonna talk to her that way. But Richie just smile and walk out. Ms. Kelly, she be gone by Thanksgiving."

"Not necessarily," I said. "Sometimes people surprise you."

"Not me, they don't."

"Maybe even you, Lateesha."

Jenny Kelly's eyes wore permanent rings: sleeplessness, anger, smudged mascara. In the faculty room she sat hunched over her coffee, scribbling furiously with red pen on student compositions. I found myself choosing a different table.

"Hi, Gene," Bucky's voice said on my answering machine. "Please call if you . . . I wondered whether you found out any . . . give me a call. Please. I have a different phone number, I'll give it to you." Pause. "I've moved."

I didn't call him back. Something in the "I've moved" hinted at more pain, more complications, another chapter in Bucky's messy internal drama. I decided to call him only if I heard something from Johnny Fermato.

Who phoned me the following Tuesday, eight days after my visit to Midtown South. "Gene. John Fermato."

"Hey, Johnny."

"I'm calling to follow through on our conversation last week. I'm afraid the information you requested is unavailable."

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I stood in my minuscule kitchen, listening to the traffic three stories below, listening to Johnny's cold formality. "Unavailable?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"You mean the file has disappeared? Been replaced by a later version? Somebody's sitting on it?"

"I'm sorry, the information you requested isn't available."

"Right," I said, without expression.

"Catch you soon."

"Bye, Lieutenant."

After he hung up I stood there holding the receiver, surprised at how much it hurt. It was a full five minutes before the anger came. And then it was distant, muffled. Filtered through the Camineur, so that it wouldn't get out of hand.

Safe.

Jeff Connors showed up at school after a three-day absence, wearing a beeper, and a necklace of thick gold links.

"Jeff, he big now," Lateesha told me, and turned away, lips pursed like the disapproving mother she would someday be.

I was patrolling the hall before the first bell when Jenny Kelly strode past me and stopped at the door to the boys' room, which wasn't really a door but a turning that hid the urinals and stalls from obvious view. The door itself had been removed after the fifth wastebasket fire in two days. Jeff came around the corner, saw Ms. Kelly, and stopped. I could see he was thinking about retreating again, but her voice didn't let him. "I want to see you, Jeff. In my free period." Her voice said he would be there.

"Okay," Jeff said, with no hustle, and slouched off, beeper riding on his hip.

I said to her, "He knows when your free period is."

She looked at me coolly. "Yes."

"So you've gotten him to talk to you."

"A little." Still cool. "His mother disappeared for three days. She uses. She's back now, but Jeff doesn't trust her to take care of his little brother. Did you even know he had a little brother, Gene?"

I shook my head.

"Why not?" She looked like Lateesha. Disapproving mother. The raccoon eyes were etched deeper. "This boy is in trouble, and he's one we don't have to lose. We can still save him. *You* could have, last year. He admires you. But you never gave him the time of day, beyond making sure he wasn't any trouble to *you*."

"I don't think you have the right to judge whether—"

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"Don't I? Maybe not. I'm sorry. But don't you see, Jeff only wanted from you—"

"That's the bell. Good luck today, Ms. Kelly."

She stared at me, then gave me a little laugh. "Right. And where were *you* when the glaciers melted? Never mind." She walked into her classroom, which diminished in noise only a fraction of a decibel.

Her earrings were little silver hoops, and her silky blouse was red.

After school I drove to the Angels of Mercy Nursing Home and pretended I was interested in finding a place for my aging mother. A woman named Karen Gennaro showed me a dining hall, bedrooms, activity rooms, a little garden deep in marigolds and asters, nursing facilities. Old people peacefully played cards, watched TV, sat by sunshiny windows. There was no sign that eighty-year-old Lydia Smith had thrown herself from the roof, or that her J-24-bonded boyfriend Giacomo della Francesca had stabbed himself to death.

"I'd like to walk around a little by myself now," I told Ms. Gennaro. "Just sort of get the feel of the place. My mother is . . . particular."

She hesitated. "We don't usually allow—"

"Mom didn't like Green Meadows because too many corridors were painted pale blue and she hates pale blue. She rejected Saint Anne's because the other women didn't care enough about their hairdos and so the atmosphere wasn't self-respecting. She wouldn't visit Havenview because there was no piano in the dining room. This is the tenth place I've reported on."

She laughed. "No wonder you sound so weary. All right, just check out with me before you leave."

I inspected the day room again, chatting idly with a man watching the weather channel. Then I wandered to the sixth floor, where Lydia Smith and Giacomo della Francesca had lived. I chatted with an elderly man in a wheelchair, and a sixteen-year-old Catholic Youth volunteer, and a Mrs. Locurzio, who had the room on the other side of Lydia Smith's. Nothing.

A janitor came by mopping floors, a heavy young man with watery blue eyes and a sweet, puzzled face like a bearded child.

"Excuse me—have you worked here long?"

"Four years." He leaned on his mop, friendly and shy.

"Then you must come to know the patients pretty well."

"Pretty well." He smiled. "They're nice to me."

I listened to his careful, spaced speech, a little thick on each initial consonant. "Are all of them nice to you?"

"Some are mean. Because they're sick and they hurt."

"Mrs. Smith was always nice to you."

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"Oh, yes. A nice lady. She talked to me every day." His doughy face became more puzzled. "She died."

"Yes. She was unhappy with her life."

He frowned. "Mrs. Smith was unhappy? But she . . . no. She was happy." He looked at me in appeal. "She was *always* happy. Aren't you her friend?"

"Yes," I said. "I just made a mistake about her being unhappy."

"She was *always* happy. With Mr. Frank. They laughed and laughed and read books."

"Mr. della Francesca."

"He said I could call him Mr. Frank."

I said, "What's your name?"

"Pete," he said, as if I should know it.

"Oh, you're Pete! Yes, Mrs. Smith spoke to me about you. Just before she died. She said you were nice, too."

He beamed. "She was my friend."

"You were sad when she died, Pete."

"I was sad when she died."

I said, "What exactly happened?"

His face changed. He picked up the mop, thrust it into the rolling bucket. "Nothing."

"Nothing? But Mrs. Smith is dead."

"I gotta go now." He started to roll the bucket across the half-mopped floor, but I placed a firm hand on his arm. There's a cop intuition that has nothing to do with neuropharms.

I said, "Some bad people killed Mrs. Smith."

He looked at me, and something shifted behind his pale blue gaze.

"They didn't tell you that, I know. They said Mrs. Smith killed herself. But you know she was very happy and didn't do that, don't you? What did you see, Pete?"

He was scared now. Once, a long time ago, I hated myself for doing this to people like Pete. Then I got so I didn't think about it. It didn't bother me now, either.

"Mrs. Gennaro killed Mrs. Smith," I said.

Shock wiped out fear. "No, she didn't! She's a nice lady!"

"I say Mrs. Gennaro and the doctor killed Mrs. Smith."

"You're crazy! You're an asshole! Take it back!"

"Mrs. Gennaro and the doctor—"

"Mrs. Smith and Mr. Frank was all alone together when they went up to that roof!"

I said swiftly, "How do you know?"

But he was panicked now, genuinely terrified. Not of me—of what he'd said. He opened his mouth to scream. I said, "Don't worry, Pete. I'm a

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cop. I work with the cops you talked to before. They just sent me to double check your story. I work with the same cops you told before."

"With Officer Camp?"

"That's right," I said. "With Officer Camp."

"Oh." He still looked scared. "I told them already! I told them I unlocked the roof door for Mrs. Smith and Mr. Frank like they asked me to!"

"Pete—"

"I gotta go!"

"Go ahead, Pete. You did good."

He scurried off. I left the building before he could find Karen Gennaro.

A call to an old friend at Records turned up an Officer Joseph Camphausen at Midtown South, a Ralph Campogiani in the Queens Robbery Squad, a Bruce Campinella at the two-four, and a detective second grade Joyce Campolieto in Intelligence. I guessed Campinella, but it didn't matter which one Pete had talked to, or that I wouldn't get another chance inside Angels of Mercy. I headed for West End Avenue.

The sun was setting. Manhattan was filled with river light. I drove up the West Side Highway with the window down, and remembered how much Margie had liked to do that, even in the winter. *Real air, Gene. Chilled like good beer.*

Nobody at the Beth Israel Retirement Home would talk to me about the two old people who died there, Samuel Fetterolf and Rose Kaplan. Nor would they let me wander around loose after my carefully guided tour. I went to the Chinese restaurant across the street and waited.

From every street-side window in Beth Israel I'd seen them head in here: well-dressed men and women visiting their parents and aunts and grandmothers after work. They'd stay an hour, and then they'd be too hungry to go home and cook, or maybe too demoralized to go home without a drink, a steady stream of overscheduled people dutifully keeping up connections with their old. I chose a table in the bar section, ordered, and ate slowly. It took a huge plate of moo goo gai pan and three club sodas before I heard it.

"How can you *say* that? She's not senile, Brad! She knows whether her friends are suicidal or not!"

"I didn't say she—"

"Yes, you did! You said we can't trust her perceptions! She's only old, not stupid!" Fierce thrust of chopsticks into her sweet and sour. She was about thirty, slim and tanned, her dark hair cut short. Preppy shirt and sweater. He wasn't holding up as well, the paunch and bald spot well underway, the beleaguered husband look not yet turned resentful.

"Joanne, I only said—"

"You said we should just discount what Grams said and leave her there, *even though* she's so scared. You always discount what she says!"

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"I don't. I just—"

"Like about that thing at Passover. What Grams wanted was completely reasonable, and you just—"

"Excuse me," I said, before they drifted any more. The thing at Passover wouldn't do me any good. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't help but overhear. I have a grandmother in Beth Israel, too, and I'm a little worried about her, otherwise I wouldn't interrupt, it's just that . . . my grandmother is scared to stay there, too."

They inspected me unsmilingly, saying nothing.

"I don't know what to do," I said desperately. "She's never been like this."

"I'm sorry," Brad said stiffly, "we can't help."

"Oh, I understand. Strangers. I just thought . . . you said something about your grandmother being frightened . . . I'm sorry." I got up to leave, projecting embarrassment.

"Wait a minute," Joanne said. "What did you say your name was?"

"Aaron Sanderson."

"Joanne, I don't think—"

"Brad, if he has the same problem as—Mr. Sanderson, what is your grandmother afraid of? Is she usually nervous?"

"No, that's just it," I said, moving closer to their table. Brad frowned at me. "She's never nervous or jittery, and never depressed. She's fantastic, actually. But ever since those two residents died . . . "

"Well, that's just *it*," Joanne said. Brad sighed and shifted his weight. "Grams was friendly with Mrs. Kaplan, and she told me that Mrs. Kaplan would never in a million years commit suicide. She just *wouldn't.*"

"Same thing my grandmother said. But I'm sure there couldn't be actual danger in Beth Israel," I said. Dismiss what the witness said and wait for the contradiction.

"Why not?" Joanne said. "They could be testing some new medication . . . in fact, Grams said Mrs. Kaplan had volunteered for some clinical trial. She had cancer."

Brad said, "And so naturally she was depressed. Or maybe depression was a side effect of the drug. You read about that shit all the time. The drug company will be faced with a huge lawsuit, they'll settle, they'll stop giving the pills, and everybody's grandmother is safe. That simple."

"No, smartie." Joanne glared at him. "It's not that simple. Grams said she spent the afternoon with Mrs. Kaplan a week or so *after* she started the drug. Mrs. Kaplan was anything but depressed. She was really up, and she'd fallen in love with Mr. Fetterolf who was also in the trial, and his daughter-in-law Dottie was telling me—"

"Joanne, let's go," Brad said. "I don't really feel like arguing here."

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I said, "My grandmother knew Mr. Fetterolf slightly. And she's worried about his suicide—"

"So am *I*," Joanne said. "I keep telling and telling Brad—"

"Joanne, I'm going. You do what the hell you want."

"You can't just—all right, all right! Everything has to be your way!" She flounced up, threw me an apologetic look, and followed her husband out.

There were four Fetterolfs in the Manhattan phone directory. Two were single initials, which meant they were probably women living alone. I chose Herman Fetterolf on West Eighty-sixth.

The apartment building was nice, with a carpeted lobby and deep comfortable sofas. I said to the doorman, "Please tell Mrs. Dottie Fetterolf that there's a private investigator to talk to her about her father-in-law's death. My name is Joe Carter. Ask her if she'll come down to the lobby to talk to me."

He gave me a startled look and conveyed the message. When Mrs. Fetterolf came down, I could see she was ready to be furious at somebody, anybody. Long skirt swishing, long vest flapping, she steamed across the lobby. "You the private investigator? Who are you working for?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, Mrs. Fetterolf. But it's someone who, like you, has lost an elderly relative to suicide."

"Suicide! Ha! It wasn't any suicide! It was murder!"

"Murder?"

"They killed him! And no one will admit it!"

"What makes you think so?"

"Think? *Think?* I don't have to think, I *know!* One week he's fine, he's friends with this Mrs. Kaplan, they play Scrabble, they read books together, he's happy as a clam. Maybe even a little something gets going between them, who am I to say, more power to them. And then on the same night—the *same* night—he hangs himself and she walks in front of a bus! Coincidence? I don't think so! . . . Besides, there would be a note."

"I beg your—"

"My father-in-law would have left a note. He was thoughtful that way. You know what I'm saying? He wrote everybody in the whole family all the time, nobody could even keep up with reading it all. He would have left a note for sure."

"Did he—"

"He was lonely after his wife died. Sarah. A saint. They met fifty-six years ago—"

In the end, she gave me her father-in-law's entire history. Also Rose Kaplan's. I wrote it all down.

When I called Johnny Fermato, I was told by a wary desk sergeant that Lieutenant Fermato would get back to me.

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In my dreams.

"Somebody's being screwed over, Margie," I said. "And it's probably costing somebody else pay-off money."

She lay there in the fetal position, her hands like claws. The IV was gone, but she was still connected by tubes to the humidified air supply, the catheter bag, the feeding pump. The pump made soft noises: *ronk, ronk*. I laid my briefcase on the bottom of her bed, which Susan would probably object to.

"It wasn't depression," I said to Margie. "Della Francesca and Mrs. Smith went up to that roof together. Alone together. Samuel Fetterolf and Rose Kaplan were in love." J-24 chemically induced love.

The bag in Margie's IV slowly emptied. The catheter bag slowly filled. Her ears were hidden under the dry, brittle, lifeless hair.

"Johnny Fermato knows something. Maybe only that the word's been passed down to keep the case closed. I did get the coroners' reports. They say 'self-inflicted fatal wounds.' All eight reports."

Somewhere in the hospital corridors, a woman screamed. Then stopped.

"Margie," I heard myself saying, "I don't want to come here anymore."

The next second, I was up and limping around the room. I put my forehead against the wall and ground it in. How could I say that to her? Margie, the only woman I'd ever loved, the person in the world I was closest to. . . . On our wedding night, which was also her nineteenth birthday, she'd told me she felt like she could die from happiness. And I'd known what she meant.

And on that other night eight years later, when Bucky had done his pills-and-vodka routine, Marge had been with me when the phone rang.

Gene . . . Gene . . . I did it. . . .

Did what? Jesus, Bucky, it's after midnight—

But I don't . . . Father Healey . . .

Bucky, I gotta start my shift at eight tomorrow morning. Goodnight.

Gene, who's calling at this hour?

. . . say . . . good-bye. . . .

Of all the inconsiderate . . . the phone woke Libby!

Tell Father Healey I never would have made . . . good priests don't doubt like . . . I can't touch God anymore. . . .

And then I'd known. I was out of the apartment in fifteen seconds. Shoes, pants, gun. In my pajama top I drove to the seminary, leaned on the bell. Bucky wasn't there, but Father Healey was. I searched the rooms, the chapel, the little meditation garden, all the while traffic noises drowning out the thumping in my chest. Father Healey shouting questions at me. I wouldn't let him in my car. Get away from me you bastard

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you killed him, you and your insistence on pushing God on a mind never tightly wrapped in the first place . . . Bucky wasn't at his mother's house. Now I had two people screaming at me.

I found him at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows. Where I should have looked first. He'd broken a stained glass window, just smashed it with a board, no subtlety. He was in front of the altar, breathing shallow, already unconscious. EMS seemed to take forever to get there. The on-duty cops were faster; the stained-glass was alarm-wired.

But when it was over, Bucky's stomach pumped, sleeping it off at St. Vincent's, I had crawled back in bed next to Margie. Libby asleep in her little bedroom. I'd put my arms around my wife, and I'd vowed that after Bucky got out of the hospital, I'd never see him and his messy stupid dramas of faith again.

"I didn't mean that," I said to Margie, inert in her trach collar. "Sweetheart, I didn't mean it. Of course I want to be here. I'll be here as long as you're breathing!"

She didn't move. IV bag emptying, catheter bag filling.

Susan came in, her nurse's uniform rumpled. "Hi, Gene."

"Hello, Susan."

"We're about the same tonight."

I could see that. And then the Camineur kicked in and I could see something else, in one of those unbidden flashes of knowledge that Bucky called heightened connective cognition. Bucky hadn't phoned me because he didn't really want to know what had happened to those old people. He already had enough belief to satisfy himself. He just wanted J-24 cleared publicly, and he wanted me to start the stink that would do it. He was handing the responsibility for Rose Kaplan and Samuel Fetterolf and Lydia Smith and Giacomo della Francesca to me. Just the way he'd handed me the responsibility for his break with Father Healey the night of his attempted suicide. I'd been used.

"Fuck that!"

Susan turned, startled, from changing Margie's catheter bag. "I beg your pardon?"

Margie, of course, said nothing.

I limped out of the hospital room, ignoring the look on Susan's face. I was angrier than I had been in eighteen months. Anger pushed against the inside of my chest and shot like bullets through my veins.

Until the Camineur did its thing.

A dozen boys crowded the basketball hoop after school, even though it was drizzling. I limped toward my car. Just as I reached it, a red Mercedes pulled up beside me and Jeff Connors got out from the passenger side.

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He wore a blue bandana on his head, and it bulged on the left side above the ear. Heavy bandaging underneath; somebody had worked on him. He also wore a necklace of heavy gold links, a beeper, and jacket of supple brown leather. He didn't even try to keep the leather out of the rain.

His eyes met mine, and something flickered behind them. The Mercedes drove off. Jeff started toward the kids at the hoops, who'd all stopped playing to watch the car. There was the usual high-fiving and competitive dissing, but I heard its guarded quality, and I saw something was about to go down.

Nothing to do with me. I unlocked my car door.

Jenny Kelly came hurrying across the court, through the drizzle. Her eyes flashed. "Jeff! Jeff!"

She didn't even know enough not to confront him in front of his customers. He stared at her, impassive, no sign of his usual likable hustle. To him, she might as well have been a cop.

"Jeff, could I see you for a minute?"

Not a facial twitch. But something moved behind his eyes.

"Please? It's about your little brother."

She was giving him an out: family emergency. He didn't take it.

"I'm busy."

Ms. Kelly nodded. "Okay. Tomorrow, then?"

"I'm busy."

"Then I'll catch you later." She'd learned not to argue. But I saw her face after she turned from the boys sniggering behind her. She wasn't giving up, either. Not on Jeff.

Me, she never glanced at.

I got into my car and drove off, knowing better than Jenny Kelly what was happening on the basketball court behind me, not even trying to interfere. If it didn't happen on school property, it would happen off it. What was the difference, really? You couldn't stop it. No matter what idealistic fools like Jenny Kelly thought.

Her earrings were little pearls, and her shirt, damp from the rain, clung to her body.

The whole next week, I left the phone off the hook. I dropped Libby a note saying to write me instead of calling because NYNEX was having trouble with the line into my building. I didn't go to the hospital. I taught my math classes, corrected papers in my own classroom, and left right after eighth period. I only glimpsed Jenny Kelly once, at a bus stop few blocks from the school building. She was holding the hand of a small black kid, three or four, dressed in a Knicks sweatshirt. They were waiting for a bus. I drove on by.

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But you can't really escape.

I spotted the guy when I came out of the metroteller late Friday afternoon. I'd noticed him earlier, when I dropped off a suit at the drycleaner's. This wasn't the kind of thing I dealt with any more—but it happens. Somebody you collared eight years ago gets out and decides to get even. Or somebody spots you by accident and suddenly remembers some old score on behalf of his cousin, or your partner, or some damn thing you yourself don't even recall. It happens.

I couldn't move fast, not with my knee. I strolled into Mulcahy's, which has a long aisle running between the bar and the tables, with another door to the alley that's usually left open if the weather's any good. The men's and ladies' rooms are off an alcove just before the alley, along with a pay phone and cigarette machine. I nodded at Brian Mulcahy behind the bar, limped through, and went into the ladies'. It was empty. I kept the door cracked. My tail checked the alley, then strode toward the men's room. When his back was to the ladies' and his hand on the heavy door, I grabbed him.

He wasn't as tall or heavy as I was—average build, brown hair, nondescript looks. He twisted in my grasp, and I felt the bulge of the gun under his jacket. "Stop it, Shaunessy! NYPD!"

I let him go. He fished out his shield, looking at me hard. Then he said, "Not here. This is an informant hangout—didn't you *know?* Meet me at 248 West Seventieth, apartment 8. Christ, why don't you fix your goddamn *phone?*" Then he was gone.

I had a beer at the bar while I thought it over. Then I went home. When the buzzer rang an hour and a half later, I didn't answer. Whoever stood downstairs buzzed for ten minutes straight before giving up.

That night I dreamed someone was trying to kill Margie, stalking her through the Times Square sleaze and firing tiny chemically poisoned darts. I couldn't be sure, dreams being what they are, but I think the stalker was me.

The Saturday mail came around three-thirty. It brought a flat manilla package, no return address, no note. It was a copy of the crime-scene report on the deaths of Lydia Smith and Giacomo della Francesca.

Seven years as partners doesn't just wash away. No matter what the official line has to be.

There were three eight-by-ten color crime scene photos: an empty rooftop; Mrs. Smith's body smashed on the pavement below; della Francesca's body lying on the floor beside a neatly made bed. His face was in partial shadow but his skinny spotted hands were clear, both clutching the hilt of the knife buried in his chest. There wasn't much blood. That doesn't happen until somebody pulls the knife out.

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The written reports didn't say anything that wasn't in the photos.

I resealed the package and locked it in my file cabinet. Johnny had come through; Bucky had screwed me. The deaths were suicides, just like Kelvin Pharmaceuticals said, just like the Department said. Bucky's superconnective pill was the downer to end all downers, and he knew it, and he was hoping against hope it wasn't so.

Because he and Tommy had taken it together.

I've moved, Bucky had said in his one message since he told me about J-24. I'd assumed he meant that he'd changed apartments, or lovers, or lives, as he'd once changed from fanatic seminarian to fanatic chemist. But that's not what he meant. He meant he'd made his move with J-24, because he wanted the effect for himself and Tommy, and he refused to believe the risk applied to him. Just like all the dumb crack users I spent sixteen years arresting.

I dialed his number. After four rings, the answering machine picked up. I hung up, walked from the living room to the bedroom, pounded my fists on the wall a couple times, walked back and dialed again. When the machine picked up I said, "Bucky. This is Gene. Call me *now*. I mean it—I have to know you're all right."

I hesitated . . . he hadn't contacted me in weeks. What could I use as leverage?

"If you don't call me tonight, Saturday, by nine, I'll . . . " What? Not go look for him. Not again, not like thirteen years ago, rushing out in pants and pajama top, Margie calling after me *Gene! Gene! For God's sake . . .*

I couldn't do it again.

"If you don't phone by nine o'clock, I'll call the feds with what I've found about J-24, without checking it out with you first. So *call me,* Bucky."

Usually on Saturday afternoon I went to the hospital to see Margie. Not today. I sat at my kitchen table with algebra tests from 7B spread over the tiny surface, and it took me an hour to get through three papers. I kept staring at the undecorated wall, seeing Bucky there. Seeing the photos of Lydia Smith and Giacomo della Francesca. Seeing that night thirteen years ago when Bucky had his stomach pumped. Then I'd wrench myself back to the test papers and correct another problem. *If train A leaves point X traveling at a steady fifty miles per hour at six* A.M. . . .

If a bullet leaves a gun traveling at 1500 feet per second, it can tear off a human head. Nobody realizes that but people who have seen it. Soldiers. Doctors. Cops.

After a while, I realized I was staring at the wall again, and picked up another paper. *If 3X equals 2Y* . . . Some of the names on the papers I didn't even recognize. Who was James Dillard? Was he the tall quiet

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kid in the last row, or the short one in shoes held together with tape, who fell asleep most mornings? They were just names.

On the wall, I saw Jenny Kelly holding the hand of Jeff Connors's little brother.

At seven-thirty I shoved the papers into my briefcase and grabbed my jacket. Before I left, I tried Bucky's number once more. No answer. I turned off the living room light and limped along the hall to the door. Before I opened it, my foot struck something. Without even thinking about it, I flattened against the wall and reached behind me for the foyer light.

It was only another package. A padded mailer, nine by twelve, the cheap kind that leaks oily black stuffing all over you if you open it wrong. The stuffing was already coming out a little tear in one corner. There were no stamps, no address; it had been shoved under the door. Whoever had left it had gotten into the building—not hard to do on a Saturday, with people coming and going, just wait until someone else has unlocked the door and smile at them as you go in, any set of keys visible in your hand. In the upper left corner of the envelope was an NYPD evidence sticker.

I picked up the package just as the phone rang.

"Bucky! Where are—"

"Gene, this is Jenny Kelly. Listen, I need your help. Please! I just got a call from Jeff Connors, he didn't know who else to call . . . the police have got him barricaded in a drug house, they're yelling at him to come out and he's got Darryl with him, that's his little brother, and he's terrified—Jeff is—that they'll knock down the door and go in shooting . . . God, Gene, please go! It's only four blocks from you, that's why I called, and you know how these things work . . . please!"

She had to pause for breath. I said tonelessly, "What's the address?"

She told me. I slammed the receiver down in the midst of her thank-you's. If she'd been in the room with me, I think I could have hit her.

I limped the four blocks north, forcing my damaged knee, and three blocks were gone before I realized I still had the padded envelope in my hand. I folded it in half and shoved it in my jacket pocket.

The address wasn't hard to find. Two cars blocked the street, lights whirling, and I could hear more sirens in the distance. The scene was all fucked up. A woman of twenty-one or twenty-two was screaming hysterically and jumping up and down: "He's got my baby! He's got a gun up there! He's going to kill my son!" while a uniform who looked about nineteen was trying ineptly to calm her down. Her clothes were torn and bloody. She smacked the rookie across the arm and his partner moved in to restrain her, while another cop with a bullhorn shouted up at the building. Neighbors poured out onto the street. The one uniform

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left was trying to do crowd control, funneling them away from the building, and nobody was going. He looked no older than the guy holding the woman, as if he'd had about six hours total time on the street.

I had my dummy shield. We'd all had our shields duplicated, one thirty-second of an inch smaller than the real shield, so we could leave the real one home and not risk a fine and all the paperwork if it got lost. When I retired, I turned in my shield but kept the dummy. I flashed it now at the rookie struggling with the hysterical girl. That might cost me a lot of trouble later, but I'd worry about that when the time came.

The street thinking comes back so fast.

"This doesn't look right," I shouted at the rookie over the shrieking woman. She was still flailing in his hold, screaming, "He's got my baby! He's got a gun! For Chrissake, get my baby before he kills him!" The guy with the bullhorn stopped shouting and came over to us.

"Who are you?"

"He's from Hostage and Barricade," the rookie gasped, although I hadn't said so. I didn't contradict him. He was trying so hard to be gentle with the screaming woman that she was twisting like a dervish while he struggled to cuff her.

"Look," I said, "she's not the mother of that child up there. He's the perp's little brother, and she sure the hell doesn't look old enough to be the older kid's mother!"

"How do you—" the uniform began, but the girl let out a shriek that could have leveled buildings, jerked one hand free and clawed at my face.

I ducked fast enough that she missed my eyes, but her nails tore a long jagged line down my cheek. The rookie stopped being gentle and cuffed her so hard she staggered. The sleeve of her sweater rode up when he jerked her arms behind her back, and I saw the needle tracks.

Shit, shit, shit.

Two back-up cars screamed up. An older cop in plain clothes got out, and I slipped my dummy shield back in my pocket.

"Listen, officer, I *know* that kid up there, the one with the baby. I'm his teacher. He's in the eighth grade. His name is Jeff Connors, the child with him is his little brother Darryl, and this woman is *not* their mother. Something's going down here, but it's not what she says."

He looked at me hard. "How'd you get that wound?"

"She clawed him," the rookie said. "He's from—"

"He phoned me," I said urgently, holding him with my eyes. "He's scared stiff. He'll come out with no problems if you let him, and leave Darryl there."

"You're his teacher? That why he called you? You got ID?"

I showed him my United Federation of Teachers card, driver's license, Benjamin Franklin Junior High pass. The uniforms had all been pressed

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into crowd control by a sergeant who looked like he knew what he was doing.

"Where'd he get the gun? He belong to a gang?"

I said, "I don't know. But he might."

"How do you know there's nobody else up there with him?"

"He didn't say so on the phone. But I don't know for sure."

"What's the phone number up there?"

"I don't know. He didn't give it to me."

"Is he on anything?"

"I don't know. I would guess no."

He stood there, weighing it a moment. Then he picked up the bullhorn, motioned to his men to get into position. His voice was suddenly calm, even gentle. "Connors! Look, we know you're with your little brother, and we don't want either of you to get hurt. Leave Darryl there and come down by yourself. Leave the gun and just come on down. You do that and everything'll be fine."

"He's going to kill my—" the woman shrieked, before someone shoved her into a car and slammed the door.

"Come on, Jeff, we can do this nice and easy, no problems for anybody."

I put my hand to my cheek. It came away bloody.

The negotiator's voice grew even calmer, even more reasonable.

"I know Darryl's probably scared, but he doesn't have to be, just come on down and we can get him home where he belongs. Then you and I can talk about what's best for your little brother. . . ."

Jeff came out. He slipped out of the building, hands on his head, going, "Don't shoot me, please don't shoot me, don't shoot me," and he wasn't the hustler of the eighth grade who knew all the moves, wasn't the dealer in big gold on the basketball court. He was a terrified thirteen-year-old in a dirty blue bandana, who'd been set up.

Cops in body armor rushed forward and grabbed him. More cops started into the building. A taxi pulled up and Jenny Kelly jumped out, dressed in a low-cut black satin blouse and black velvet skirt.

"Jeff! Are you all right?"

Jeff looked at her, and I think if they'd been alone, he might have started to cry. "Darryl's up there alone. . . ."

"They'll bring Darryl down safe," I said.

"I'll take Darryl to your aunt's again," Jenny promised. A man climbed out of the taxi behind her and paid the driver. He was scowling. The rookie glanced down the front of Jenny's dress.

Jeff was cuffed and put into a car. Jenny turned to me. "Oh, your face, you're hurt! Where will they take Jeff, Gene? Will you go, too? Please?"

"I'll have to. I told them it was me that Jeff phoned."

She smiled. I'd never seen her smile like that before, at least not at

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me. I kept my eyes raised to her face, and my own face blank. "Who set him up, Jenny?"

"Set him up?"

"That woman was yelling she's Darryl's mother and Jeff was going to kill her baby. Somebody wanted the cops to go storming in there and start shooting. If Jeff got killed, the NYPD would be used as executioners. If he didn't, he'd still be so scared they'll own him. Who it is, Jenny? The same one who circulated that inflammatory crap about a Neighborhood Safety Information Network?"

She frowned. "I don't know. But Jeff has been . . . there were some connections that . . ." She trailed off, frowned again. Her date came up to us, still scowling. "Gene, this is Paul Snyder. Paul, Gene Shaunessy. . . . Paul, I'm sorry, I have to go with Gene to wherever they're taking Jeff. I'm the one he really called. And I said I'd take Darryl to his aunt."

"Jenny, for Chrissake . . . we have tickets for the Met!"

She just looked at him, and I saw that Paul Snyder wasn't going to be seeing any more of Jenny Kelly's cleavage.

"I'll drive you to the precinct, Jenny," I said. "Only I have to be the first one interviewed, I have to be as quick as I can because there's something else urgent tonight. . . . " Bucky. Dear God.

Jenny said quickly, "Your wife? Is she worse?"

"She'll never be worse. Or better," I said before I knew I was going to say anything, and immediately regretted it.

"Gene . . . " Jenny began, but I didn't let her finish. She was standing too close to me. I could smell her perfume. A fold of her black velvet skirt blew against my leg.

I said harshly, "You won't last at school another six months if you take it all this hard. You'll burn out. You'll leave."

Her gaze didn't waver. "Oh no, I won't. And don't talk to me in that tone of voice."

"Six months," I said, and turned away. A cop came out of the building carrying a wailing Darryl. And the lieutenant came over to me, wanting to know whatever it was I thought I knew about Jeff Connors's connections.

It was midnight before I got home. After the precinct house there'd been a clinic, with the claw marks on my face disinfected and a tetanus shot and a blood test and photographs for the assault charges. After that, I looked for Bucky.

He wasn't at his apartment, or at his mother's apartment. The weekend security guard at Kelvin Pharmaceuticals said he'd been on duty since four P.M. and Dr. Romano hadn't signed in to his lab. That was the

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entire list of places I knew to look. Bucky's current life was unknown to me. I didn't even know Tommy's last name.

I dragged myself through my apartment, pulling off my jacket. The light on the answering machine blinked.

My mind—or the Camineur—made some connections. Even before I pressed the MESSAGE button, I think I knew.

"Gene, this is Tom Fletcher. You don't know me . . . we've never met. . . ." A deeper voice than I'd expected but ragged, spiky. "I got your message on Vince Romano's machine. About the J-24. Vince . . . " The voice caught, went on. "Vince is in the hospital. I'm calling from there. St. Clare's, it's on Ninth at Fifty-first. Third floor. Just before he . . . said to tell you . . . "

I couldn't make out the words in the rest of the message.

I sat there in the dark for a few minutes. Then I pulled my jacket back on and caught a cab to St. Clare's. I didn't think I could drive.

The desk attendant waved me through. He thought I was just visiting Margie, even at this hour. It had happened before. But not lately.

Bucky lay on the bed, a sheet pulled up to his chin but not yet over his face. His eyes were open. Suddenly I didn't want to know what the sheet was covering—how he'd done it, what route he'd chosen, how long it had taken. All the dreary algebra of death. *If train A leaves the station at a steady fifty miles per hour. . . .* There were no marks on Bucky's face. He was smiling.

And then I saw he was still breathing. Bucky, the ever inept, had failed a second time.

Tommy stood in a corner, as if he couldn't get it together enough to sit down. Tall and handsome, he had dark well-cut hair and the kind of fresh complexion that comes with youth and exercise. He looked about fifteen years younger than Bucky. When had they taken the J-24 together? Lydia Smith and Giacomo della Francesca had killed themselves within hours of each other. So had Rose Kaplan and Samuel Fetterolf. How much did Tommy know?

He stood and held out his hand. His voice was husky. "You're Gene."

"I'm Gene."

"Tom Fletcher. Vince and I are—"

"I know," I said, and stared down at Bucky's smiling face, and wondered how I was going to tell this boy that he, too, was about to try to kill himself for chemically induced love.

I flashed on Bucky and me sitting beside the rainstreaked alley window of the Greek diner. *What are you waiting for, Bucky, your prince to come?*

Yes. And, *Have you ever thought what it would be like to be really merged—to know him, to be him?*

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"Tom," I said. "There's something we have to discuss."

"Discuss?" His voice had grown even huskier.

"About Bucky. Vince. You and Vince."

"What?"

I looked down at Bucky's smiling face.

"Not here. Come with me to the waiting room."

It was deserted at that hour, a forlorn alcove of scratched furniture, discarded magazines, too-harsh fluorescent lights. We sat facing each other on red plastic chairs.

I said abruptly, "Do you know what J-24 is?"

His eyes grew wary. "Yes."

"What is it?" I couldn't find the right tone. I was grilling him as if he were under arrest and I were still a cop.

"It's a drug that Vince's company was working on. To make people bond to each other, merge together in perfect union." His voice was bitter.

"What else did he tell you?"

"Not much. What should he have told me?"

You never see enough, not even in the streets, to really prepare you. Each time you see genuine cruelty, it's like the first time. Damn you, Bucky. Damn you to hell for emotional greed.

I said, "He didn't tell you that the clinical subjects who took J-24 . . . the people who bonded . . . he didn't tell you they were all elderly?"

"No," Tom said.

"The same elderly who have been committing suicide all over the city? The ones in the papers?"

"Oh, my God."

He got up and walked the length of the waiting room, maybe four good steps. Then back. His handsome face was gray as ash. "They killed themselves after taking J-24? Because of J-24?"

I nodded. Tom didn't move. A long minute passed, and then he said softly, "My poor Vince."

"Poor *Vince?* How the hell can you . . . don't you get it, Tommy boy? You're next! You took the bonding drug with poor suffering Vince, and your three weeks or whatever of joy are up and you're dead, kid! The chemicals will do their thing in your brain, super withdrawal, and you'll kill yourself just like Bucky! Only you'll probably be better at it and actually succeed!"

He stared at me. And then he said, "Vince didn't try to kill himself."

I couldn't speak.

"He didn't attempt suicide. Is that what you thought? No, he's in a catatonic state. And *I* never took J-24 with him."

"Then who . . . "

"God," Tom said, and the full force of bitterness was back. "He took it

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with God. At some church, Our Lady of Everlasting Something. Alone in front of the altar, fasting and praying. He told me when he moved out."

When he moved out. Because it wasn't Tommy that Bucky really wanted, it was God. It had always been God, for thirteen solid years. *Tell Father Healey I can't touch God any more. . . . Have you ever thought what it would be like to be really merged, to know him to be him? . . .* No. To know Him. To be Him. *What are you waiting for, your Prince?*

Yes.

Tom said, "After he took the damned drug, he lost all interest in me. In everything. He didn't go to work, just sat in the corner smiling and laughing and crying. He was like . . . high on something, but not really. I don't know what he was. It wasn't like anything I ever saw before."

Nor anybody else. Merged with God. *They knew each other, they almost were each other. Think, Gene! To have an end to the terrible isolation in which we live our whole tiny lives. . . .*

"I got so *angry* with him," Tom said, "and it did no good at all. I just didn't count any more. So I told him to get out, and he did, and then I spent three days looking for him but I couldn't find him anywhere, and I was frantic. Finally he called me, this afternoon. He was crying. But again it was like I wasn't even really there, not me, Tom. He sure the hell wasn't crying over *me.*"

Tom walked to the one small window, which was barred. Back turned to me, he spoke over his shoulder. Carefully, trying to get it word-perfect.

"Vince said I should call you. He said, 'Tell Gene—it wears off. And then the grief and loss and anger . . . *especially* the anger that it's over. But I can beat it. It's different for me. They couldn't.' Then he hung up. Not a word to me."

I said, "I'm sorry."

He turned. "Yeah, well, that was Vince, wasn't it? *He* always came first with himself."

No, I could have said. God came first. And that's how Bucky beat the J-24 withdrawal. Human bonds, whether forged by living or chemicals, got torn down as much as built up. But you don't have to live in a three-room apartment with God, fight about money with God, listen to God snore and fart and say things so stupid you can't believe they're coming out of the mouth of your beloved, watch God be selfish or petty or cruel. God was *bigger* than all that, at least in Bucky's mind, was so big that He filled everything. And this time when God retreated from him, when the J-24 wore off and Bucky could feel the bonding slipping away, Bucky slipped along after it. Deeper into his own mind, where all love exists anyway.

"The doctor said he might never come out of the catatonia," Tom said. He was starting to get angry now, the anger of self-preservation. "Or he

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might. Either way, I don't think I'll be waiting around for him. He's treated me too badly."

Not a long-term kind of guy, Tommy. I said, "But you never took J-24 yourself."

"No," Tom said. "I'm not *stupid*. I think I'll go home now. Thanks for coming, Gene. Good to meet you."

"You, too," I said, knowing neither of us meant it.

"Oh, and Vince said one more thing. He said to tell you it was, too, murder. Does that make sense?"

"Yes," I said. But not, I hoped, to him.

After Tom left, I sat in the waiting room and pulled from my jacket the second package. The NYPD evidence sticker had torn when I'd jammed the padded mailer in my pocket.

It was the original crime scene report for Lydia Smith and Giacomo della Francesca, the one Johnny Fermato must have known about when he sent me the phony one. This report was signed Bruce Campinella. I didn't know him, but I could probably pick him out of a line-up from the brief tussle in Mulcahy's: average height, brown hair, undistinguished looks, furious underneath. Your basic competent honest cop, still outraged at what the system had for sale. And for sale at a probably not very high price. Not in New York.

There were only two photos this time. One I'd already seen: Mrs. Smith's smashed body on the pavement below the nursing home roof. The other was new. Della Francesca's body lying on the roof, not in his room, before the cover-up team moved him and took the second set of pictures. The old man lay face up, the knife still in his chest. It was a good photo; the facial expression was very clear. The pain was there, of course, but you could see the fury, too. The incredible rage. *And then the grief and loss and anger . . . especially the anger that it's over.*

Had della Francesca pushed Lydia Smith first, after that shattering quarrel that came from losing their special, unearthly union, and then killed himself? Or had she found the strength in her disappointment and outrage to drive the knife in, and then she jumped? Ordinarily, the loss of love doesn't mean hate. Just how unbearable was it to have had a true, perfect, unhuman end to human isolation—and then *lose* it? How much rage did that primordial loss release?

Or maybe Bucky was wrong, and it had been suicide after all. Not the anger uppermost, but the grief. Maybe the rage on della Francesca's dead face wasn't at his lost perfect love, but at his own emptiness once it was gone. He'd felt something so wonderful, so sublime, that everything *else* afterward fell unbearably short, and life itself wasn't worth the effort. No matter what he did, he'd never ever have its like again.

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I thought of Samuel Fetterolf before he took J-24, writing everyone in his family all the time, trying to stay connected. Of Pete, straining every cell of his damaged brain to protect the memories of the old people who'd been kind to him. Of Jeff Connors, hanging onto Darryl even while he moved into the world of red Mercedes and big deals. Of Jenny Kelly, sacrificing her dates and her sleep and her private life in her frantic effort to connect to the students, who she undoubtedly thought of as "her kids." Of Bucky.

The elevator to the fifth floor was out of order. I took the stairs. The shift nurse barely nodded at me. It wasn't Susan. In Margie's room the lights had been dimmed and she lay in the gloom like a curved dry husk, covered with a light sheet. I pulled the chair closer to her bed and stared at her.

And for maybe the first time since her accident, I remembered.

Roll the window down, Gene.

It's fifteen degrees out there, Margie!

It's real air. Chilled like good beer. It smells like a goddamn factory in this car.

Don't start again. I'm warning you.

Are you so afraid the job won't kill you that you want the cigarettes to do it?

Stop trying to control me.

Maybe you should do better at controlling yourself.

The night I'd found Bucky at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows, I'd been in control. It was Bucky who hadn't. I'd crawled back in bed and put my arms around Marge and vowed never to see Bucky and his messy stupid dramas of faith ever again. Marge hadn't been asleep. She'd been crying. I'd had enough hysteria for one night; I didn't want to hear it. I wouldn't even let her speak. I stalked out of the bedroom and spent the night on the sofa. It was three days before I'd even talk to her so we could work it out and make it good between us again.

Have a great year! she'd said my first September at Benjamin Franklin. But it hadn't been a great year. I was trying to learn how to be a teacher, and trying to forget how to be a cop, and I didn't have much time left over for her. We'd fought about that, and then I'd stayed away from home more and more to get away from the fighting, and by the time I returned *she* was staying away from home a lot. Over time it got better again, but I don't know where she was going the night she crossed Lexington with a bag of groceries in front of that '93 Lincoln. I don't know who the groceries were for. She never bought porterhouse and champagne for *me.*

Maybe we would have worked that out, too. Somehow.

Weren't there moments, Gene, Bucky had said, *when you felt so close to Margie it was like you crawled inside her skin for a minute? Like you*

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were Margie? No. I was never Margie. We were close, but not that close. What we'd had was good, but not *that* good. Not a perfect merging of souls.

Which was the reason I could survive its loss.

I stood up slowly, favoring my knee. On the way out of the room, I took the plastic bottle of Camineur out of my pocket and tossed it in the waste basket. Then I left, without looking back.

Outside, on Ninth Avenue, a patrol car suddenly switched on its lights and took off. Some kids who should have been at home swaggered past, heading downtown. I looked for a pay phone. By now, Jenny Kelly would be done delivering Darryl to his aunt, and Jeff Connors was going to need better than the usual overworked public defender. I knew a guy at Legal Aid, a hotshot, who still owed me a long-overdue favor.

I found the phone, and the connection went through. ●

SLEEPING BEAUTY REVISITED

What if it's your mother
who sleeps in the glass case
cold gases bathing her face
her body, the empty place
where her soul would be awake.

You touch the glass;
your fingers burn with cold.

—Laurel Winter

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ON BOOKS

by Norman Spinrad

THINGS OF THE SPIRIT

TOWING JEHOVAH
James Morrow
Harcourt Brace, $23.95
THE PRIEST
Tom Disch
Knopf, $24.00
ANCESTRAL HUNGERS
Scott Baker
Tor, $21.95
INTO THE DEEP
Ken Grimwood
Morrow, $20.00
LARQUE ON THE WING
Nancy Springer
AvoNova, $20.00
METAL ANGEL
Nancy Springer
Roc, $4.99

The contemporary SF genre, as we all know, or think we know, is divided into two kingdoms, science fiction and fantasy.

Science fiction is that sphere of imaginative literature that confines itself to a world view not inconsistent with what is currently known about the nature of the phenomenological universe, and fantasy is that sphere of imaginative literature which deliberately steps outside the bounds of that realm.

Simple, right?

If it's got scientists, cyberpunks, spaceships, computers, robots, aliens, telepathy, time travel, other planets, and so forth, it's science fiction. If it's got magic, vampires, gods, goddesses, dragons, unicorns, wizards, and so forth, it's fantasy.

If it's about scientific and technological advances and their effect on culture and consciousness, it's science fiction. If it's about the moral and metaphysical and the nature of divinity, it's fantasy.

If it deals with the things of the material world, it's science fiction; if it deals with the things of the spirit, it's fantasy.

What we mean by "the material world" is everything that is composed of atoms and subatomic constituents thereof contained within a four-dimensional space-time matrix that exploded into being from a point source in the Big Bang, an event that took place perhaps twenty billion years ago (a subject of some controversy) whereby a chance event in the underlying

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quantum flux caused the universe to bootstrap itself into existence.

What we mean by "the things of the spirit" is everything that violates or transcends the physical parameters of the "material world" as it evolves from the Big Bang toward a possible Big Crunch back into a terminal singularity at some time in the future, from the ghosties and ghoulies that go bump in the night, to Satan in his Netherworld, to the Lord God Creator of the Context from which the material realm emerged.

Right?

Perhaps some twenty billion years or so ago, being conjured itself into existence as an expanding and evolving point of singularity out of nothingness.

Science fiction.

"And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. . . . And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."

Fantasy.

Okay, maybe not so simple.

The history of the sometimes rather sanguinary dialectic between science and religion is that of the former gobbling up the intellectual territory of the latter. Most of the great questions of antiquity that religions evolved to address have been answered by science. Those lights in the sky are balls of fusion plasma. The Earth revolves around one of them. Life arose about four billion years ago via a process we will be able to replicate with off the shelf chemicals in a few years, if not already. Man is the current end product of a fairly complex clade of hominids, not even the first tool-making species.

Analytical science and progressively developing technology may have evolved independently at least twice on this planet, once in Greece and its intellectual successors in Europe and the Arab world, and earlier in China, and the Chinese were the most technologically advanced civilization on Earth well into the fourteenth century. But the centralized theocratic Chinese state froze its development in place and indeed rolled it back before it could challenge its millennial cultural cohesion, and only in the West did it continue to evolve to the point where it threatened the intellectual hegemony of established religion.

The dominant religions of the post-classical West, the period when such progressive science and the technology based upon it evolved in that region, the Catholic Church, and to a lesser extent Islam, defended their turf during a centuries-long losing battle against the scientific world view that continues today in the form of last ditch resistance offered up by creationists and fundamentalists of various stripes, who, despite all the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, continue to defend the intellectually indefensible, namely that books written before the invention of telescopes, microscopes, carbon-dating, the periodic table, indeed science itself as we know it,

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being the inspired word of God, are perfectly accurate descriptions of the material universe and its evolution.

Thus, in the West, science and religion have long been locked in a zero-sum dialectic, and the "things of science" and the "things of the spirit" have largely come to be perceived as a territorial conflict in which the knights in the lab coats perceive themselves to be pushing back the minions of superstitious darkness and the holy warriors of the spirit believe themselves to be holding back Faustian forces who have sold their souls for worldly knowledge and power to that ultimate example of the hubris of all such rebellious would-be light-bringers, the self-styled Lucifer, aka Satan.

Yes, I know, I exaggerate. The war is winding down, things are getting much more civilized. But the dualistic perception remains that the things of science and the things of the spirit are antithetical, endlessly reinforced by proponents of one world view or the other duking it out for turf.

Nowhere has this been more cartoonishly obvious than in the controversy within the SF genre between science fiction and fantasy.

Okay, on the level of the Darwinian struggle for the available rackspace, a good Marxist could argue that there really *is* a conflict in class self-interest between science fiction writers and fantasy writers thrown together by a quirk of publishing history to compete for the finite economic rewards of the same ecological niche, and a good games theorist could point out that as long as both science fiction and fantasy are published in the same lines, this one really *is* zero-sum.

But this economically generated conflict between "science fiction" and "fantasy" has led to an artificially dualistic perception of the literary and cultural realities, which is quite another matter.

As the proponents of science fiction have it, it boils down to science versus magic, playing with the net up or the net down. And having chosen as the court the description and prediction of physical reality, relating the external environment to internal consciousness, extrapolating the evolution of culture in the context of the cosmos—science having been beating the bejesus out of the competition in this regard for the better part of a millennium—it's not so surprising that the science fiction writers have it all their way on their own chosen surface.

The proponents of fantasy generally concede to the boys their phenomenological toys, but contend that fantasy, being unbound by *any* rules save those of the author's esthetic and moral judgment, being undeniably the Ur-literature of humanity, is free to draw upon the vasty mythic deeps of the species' collective unconscious and resonate therewith and may therefore claim the things of the spirit as its special literary birthright.

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Science fiction versus fantasy. Science versus magic. The phallocratic principle versus the feminine. Logic versus emotion. The natural versus the supernatural. The things of the material world versus the things of the spirit.

Right?

Wrong, so I, and, I believe, the history of the genre itself and the novels to be discussed shortly, would contend.

Fittingly enough, it was Gregory Benford, hard SF visionary himself, who uttered the aphorism: "He was a Cartesian dualist, and therefore not to be trusted."

Nor, in this day and age, are such dualistic distinctions as "science fiction" and "fantasy" to be trusted very far either.

Take, for example, *Towing Jehovah,* by James Morrow.

The gigantic dead body of the Judeo-Christian Deity is discovered floating in the ocean and the Angel Raphael commissions disgraced supertanker captain Anthony Van Horne to tow it to its final resting place in the far North.

One might be forgiven for assuming that such a novel is an unequivocal fantasy. One might be forgiven, but one would be wrong.

Towing Jehovah is instead a sort of strange species of science fiction novel, but one not without precedent in the literature. What James Morrow has done is taken a quite literally massive theological and mystical event and dropped it out of the heavens and into the material realm where his practical sea captain must cope with it on that level.

The dead body of God is surreally huge and its flesh has transcendentally sacramental properties when ingested, but on the other hand, it is subject to rot, decay, and the depredations of sharks and men. Towing the sucker through thousands of miles of ocean is a gritty job of seamanship even without the problems caused by feminist terrorists and the Catholic Church's hired battle cruiser seeking to conceal the demise of the corporate raison d'être by sending it to Davy Jones' Locker.

Towing Jehovah, for those of you who are unfamiliar with Morrow's oeuvre or somehow haven't managed to surmise same from the above plot description, is a comic novel.

A comic novel of a sort that can only work as a kind of science fiction *about* fantasy, for the central schtick is the humorous dissonance created by forcing the main character and the rest of his crew to deal with an event of ultimate spiritual significance as an exercise in technological problem-solving.

John W. Campbell, Jr., could have serialized *Towing Jehovah* in *Astounding* or *Analog* without flinching. Morrow has done his homework just like a good hard science fiction writer, and leaves you with the feeling that, yup, if you had to tow the giant dead body of God across the open sea, these are

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the problems you would have, this is how you'd have to do it.

Straight-faced science fiction is, face it, a form of fantasy in which the speculative element is limited to the realm of the possible, but when you're writing *comic* science fiction like *Towing Jehovah,* it's not only fair enough to drop one out-and-out fantastic element into the material world for the machineries thereof to cope with, it's *funny.*

Is James Morrow simply taking the satiric piss out of a deep spiritual reality by turning the Death of God into a slapstick comedy of technological and sociopolitical apparatus?

Not exactly.

He does do that, and it is funny, but somehow this is a novel that I suspect a priest or rabbi with a reasonable degree of literary sophistication could read with pleasure. One can hardly have even a comic novel whose central image is the Dead Body of God without roiling theological waters, without confronting certain spiritual conundrums that such potent imagery raises even in jest, and while Morrow never really resolves the meaning of it all on *that* level, he does almost magically imbue the novel with a true spiritual dimension that takes the vinegar out of its sting.

For while religious personages and institutions do indeed take their lumps here, *Towing Jehovah* is somehow a *gentle* novel. The central character, Van Horne, and even some of the cast surrounding him, have a certain psychological reality. They are more than schtick figures; one feels Morrow's affectionate warmth toward them.

And while there is a certain lack of clear insightful resolution of the potent imagery on the macrocosmic theological level, Van Horne, previously responsible for a grievous ecological disaster modeled on the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, and estranged from his father, finds love and a personal spiritual redemption in the end.

Which is arguably also at the core of what makes the novel science fiction rather than fantasy, and that inarguably demonstrates that even this sort of neo-Campbellian science fictional deconstruction of the supernatural may still deal with the things of the spirit, those that science fiction in general would contend are the *true* things of the spirit; not supernatural events and beings existing outside the laws of the material realm, but the deep emotional feelings, insights, and epiphanies that arise *within* it.

Perhaps that is what Morrow is ultimately saying; namely that God having either removed Himself from the scene in order to liberate his creatures or perished in our times of slapstick or never really having been there in the first place, this non-theological redemption, this personal spiritual salvation, entirely consistent with the cold equations, is what there is for thee and me, folks.

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On the other hand, it would be hard to imagine a Catholic prelate reading *The Priest* by Thomas M. Disch without having an embolism, for Disch herein goes after the Church, or at least the minions thereof, with blood in his eye, a rapier in one hand, and a meat-ax in the other.

Father Bryce, the priest of the title, is a compulsive pederast with a predilection for seducing altar boys, and Disch's novel is the story of his richly deserved descent into a literal and psychological hell, via, among other things, a satanic tattoo parlor, a horde of bats, a prolifer Catholic concentration camp for unwed pregnant women, and a kind of spiritual and temporal lifeswap experience with the thoroughly unpleasant thirteenth century Bishop of Roquefort, Sylvanus.

Like *Towing Jehovah, The Priest* is in a similar sense a science fiction novel about the sphere of fantasy; less so in one sense, more so in another.

Disch, far from playing Morrow's literary game of turning a single central mystical element into a phenomenological object and intruding it into the material world to watch the fun and games, goes the whole fantasy nine yards, with demons, devils, mystical time travel, and so forth, taking the Catholic world view on such matters more or less at face value. In that sense, *The Priest* could be considered a straightforward fantasy novel.

But while Disch takes this Catholic supernatural framework as his literary given, he demystifies it by reducing it almost entirely to a material pseudo-science fictional level where a tattoo becomes a kind of time-travel device, and Hell is a place you can get lost in without a subway map. It can't really hold a torturer's candle to works of religious man like the anti-abortionists' fortress where pregnant women, having been in effect purchased by the crazed minions of the Church, are held in solitary for the gestational duration.

The Priest, like *Towing Jehovah,* is a kind of comic novel, but there is nothing gentle about this one, nor, despite the subject matter, does it have very much to do with the true things of the spirit. Instead, Disch treats the Catholic Church, its prelates, its sociology, even its mystical demonology, as in a very real sense straightforward material phenomena, all but entirely disconnected from the very spirituality it pretends to represent.

This is indeed a funny novel, but wickedly, nastily, angrily, and passionately so, and anyone familiar with Thomas M. Disch's sense of humor will see what is coming from as early as the dedication page, where he dedicates this hatchet and rapier job upon the all-too-worldly corpus of the Church to a series of real priests and bishops up to and including the Pope "without whose ministry and conjoint power of example this novel could

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not have been written."

Satire *The Priest* is, and horror too, but on another level, it is all-too-close to the realistic bone.

Disch isn't attacking Catholic transcendentalism so much as he is ignoring the Church's spiritual aspect by literalizing *everything,* by taking the supernatural elements on the same level of material reality as everything else in the manner of John W. Campbell's *Unknown* and going at the Church hammer and tongs as a political, economic, and social power in the material world.

Thus *The Priest,* paradoxically enough, erases the dualistic and arbitrary boundary between fantasy and science fiction, the things of the spirit, and the things of the material realm, by writing about an institution supposedly dedicated to the former as entirely a phenomenon of the latter, rather as if the Catholic Church were just another science fictional cult, like that of Michael Valentine Smith in *Stranger in a Strange Land,* or the death cult in Gore Vidal's *Messiah,* or, well, the Church of Scientology.

Scott Baker's *Ancestral Hungers* is no comic novel at all, is straight fantasy by any coherent content-based criterion, does genuinely concern itself with the things of the spirit, and yet, somehow, also blurs the boundaries of imaginative dualism, albeit in a rather inverse manner.

David Bathory is a kind of vampire-in-waiting, scion of the world's last remaining clan of vampires, ruled by the "dhampire," a king vampire whose psychic powers allow him to control the vampires of his bloodline, and the basic plot revolves around a struggle within the family for the succession and within David himself for his own soul.

That's the thematic core, but the story is baroquely recomplicated and impossible to summarize, partly because Baker has set at least three or maybe even more mystical belief systems (if you will, or fantasy image systems if you won't) up against each other in the same novel—the vampire legend, his own dhampire take on the vampire legend, Christian demonology, an aspect of Hindu serpent-worship, possibly bits and pieces of others—as well as no little real-world herpetology and coke-dealing lore.

The result is weirdly paradoxical, what Rudy Rucker in a science fiction context has called "Free Style," but used here in a fantasy novel with a kind of rigorous verisimilitude as literary discipline.

In one sense, the universe of *Ancestral Hungers* is like that of one of Rucker's free style science fiction novels, or like one of the new post-modern space operas in the vein of Colin Greenland's *Bring Back Plenty,* the post-modernism being that this is fiction that does not pretend to exist as anything *but* fiction, which is its own reality, rather than any mimesis of some conception of the so-called "real world," either scientific or mystical.

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Anything that the writer can think up may happen next, and *everything* takes place on the same reality level; coke smuggling and psychic communion, vampirism and realistic herpetology, cross-country driving and demonic possession, dhampirism and sibling rivalry, a love story, a massive black sabbath, transportation to any number of mystic realms, and anything and everything in between.

But while the gonzo realities of a Rudy Rucker science fiction novel or a post-modern space opera are self-consciously literary, that is, do not even attempt a pretense of realism, and thus produce a species of science fiction that crosses over via the bridge of surrealism into fantasy, *Ancestral Hungers,* by taking utterly fantastic and mystical material culled from anywhere and everywhere quite seriously on the levels of psychological realism and descriptive verisimilitude, becomes a fantasy that, via the very same bridge, crosses over in the opposite direction toward science fiction.

Unlike gonzo post-modernists who tend to glide along the surface of character, whose emotional involvement with their protagonists is usually minimal, Scott Baker manifestly cares about David Bathory, his first person narrator, takes pains to render his inner life in realistic psychological depth, and indeed centers *Ancestral Hungers* on the very real moral and spiritual questions that trouble his soul.

But Baker has borrowed so many elements from so many mystical systems, rung so many changes on them, so thoroughly mixed and recombined them, that it's hard to believe that he takes any or all of the multiplex mystical realities within realities that are the battlegrounds of the inner struggle seriously on any but a symbolic level.

In a fundamental way, the closest thing I can think of to *Ancestral Hungers* is Robert Silverberg's *Son of Man,* essentially the science fictionalization of a kind of acid trip in which the consciousness of the protagonist remains more or less constant while his worldly forms and the realities he passes through undergo continuous metamorphosis.

Ancestral Hungers is much more strongly and reconditely plotted, the story line and psychological realism are much more central, and Baker, in this fantasy novel, paradoxically enough, exercises more control, keeps it all on a more rigorous level of descriptive and psychological verisimilitude than Silverberg did in his forthrightly mystical science fiction novel.

Thus proving that it is quite possible for a fantasy novel, even one as full of conflicting magical systems as *Ancestral Hungers,* to be centered in a kind of literary realism one associates with science fiction, while a science fiction novel like *Son of Man* is quite capable of being constructed around a forth-

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rightly spiritual core.

And indeed there is a long tradition of transcendental science fiction, that is science fiction that addresses the possibilities of higher states of consciousness and being than the presently human *within* and arising from the material world, *without* accepting the notion of the supernatural; transcendentalism, as it were, with the net up.

Olaf Stapleton, A. E. Van Vogt, Theodore Sturgeon, Frank Herbert, Arthur C. Clarke, Poul Anderson, Gordon Dickson, Robert Silverberg, Gregory Benford, Greg Bear, for random examples, have all dealt with the things of the spirit in this manner, indeed more science fiction writers than not have probably done so.

You could make a strong case that this quest for and evocation of transcendent experience, higher states of consciousness and being, satoric epiphany, *within* the realm of the possible has been the central esthetic, raison d'être, and spiritual core of science fiction all along.

The fans simply call science fiction's grail the "Sense of Wonder," but when you come right down to it, it amounts to pretty much the same thing.

Take Ken Grimwood's *Into the Deep,* for example. Grimwood's *Replay* was a masterfully realistic multi-time track unequivocal science fiction novel that, as the gods of paradox would have it, won neither the Nebula nor the Hugo, but *did* win the World Fantasy award.

Into the Deep, or so at least I would contend, is also unequivocally a science fiction novel, though I would expect argument from certain quarters, since it is also pretty much unabashedly a science fiction novel with spiritual intent, even didactically so.

This is a novel about contact between dolphins and humans, told from the third person viewpoints of several characters; tuna boat captain Antonio Batera, oil platform engineer Daniel Colter, dolphin researcher Sheila Roberts, and also dolphins themselves.

In the acknowledgment, Grimwood makes it clear that this book has been extensively researched, and that he has swum with the dolphins, three of which he credits and thanks by name.

What is more, Sheila Roberts eventually learns to truly communicate with dolphins via a hard scientific perception that I have long believed is probably bang on.

Cetaceans image their surroundings by sonar. They send out ultrasound signals and read the echoes they get back off objects, living and otherwise, as images that are not only three-dimensional but give information on internal structure as well, like our own ultrasound imaging technology.

For long years, researchers have been unsuccessfully trying to communicate with dolphins by attempting to parse their rich variety of high-frequency sound signals into a dolphin "language."

Wrong, say Grimwood and his

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fictional researcher, and makes a very good case. Dolphins don't have a language in our sense, not because they lack sufficient sentience to evolve one, but because they don't need one. Nature has equipped them with the apparatus for a sophisticated mode of communication that is quite different and arguably much better.

If dolphins can send ultrasound and read three dimensional in-depth sonar images off the echoes they get back off real objects, why couldn't they send *made up* three dimensional sonar images that other dolphins could read not as words but as a form of three-dimensional in-depth television?

In a sense, this would be a form of telepathy—direct mind-to-mind communication of sequences of three-dimensional mental images, nuanced with the emotional connotations of the direct portrayal of inner somatic states, without any intermediary grammatical and linguistic encoding and decoding.

Well, whether this is true or not awaits replication by real world scientists of Roberts's fictional work, but it is certainly a plausible enough premise for a quite rigorous science fiction novel. And when Grimwood takes it one step further into imagining the viewpoint and culture of creatures whose consciousness arises in such a sensorium he's right in the mainstream of a long and honorable science fiction tradition.

Then, too, it is an undeniable scientific fact that dolphins, whales, and orcas have been around in more or less their present form for millions of years, so why *couldn't* they have had some sort of culture much longer than we have had one? And if they do communicate directly among each other without the mediation of language, why couldn't some sort of communal overmind have evolved via the process?

Thus far, *Into the Deep* holds up as science fiction in the grand old transcendental tradition, evoking the possibility of higher states of being, even the scientifically plausible, and evoking thereby the Sense of Wonder in the best possible manner, as a spiritual reality arising *from* the material world as we know it, requiring no suspension of disbelief in the supernatural.

And I can just about swallow the notion that what Batera, Colter, Roberts, and many other humans share in common is a close childhood encounter with a dolphin during which various messages were implanted in their subconscious the memory of which has been suppressed to be keyed at an appropriate time.

But, well . . .

From there, having erected an impressive, coherent, realistic, and believable science fictional structure whereby a certain form of higher consciousness may be manifested in the material world, Grimwood yanks down the net and things proceed, at least for me, to drift off well beyond the outer limits into never-never land.

Certain dolphins, it turns out, really *are* telepathic in the old fashioned vague sci-fi sense, and these

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may achieve communion up to a point thereby with the Source, the collective overmind of the whales; vast, ancient, wise, powerful almost to the point of omnipotence, a God for all practical and literary purposes.

And it also turns out that certain humans, namely all those who have been contacted by dolphins in childhood, also share this telepathic ability. And the Source was instrumental in the rise of early human civilizations. And the events of *Into the Deep* are informed by a master plan of this overmind.

And after Santa Barbara is saved from a volcanic eruption as the climax of the action plotline, the dolphins and the Source reveal their true natures and humans and cetaceans march-hand-in-flipper onward under the tutelage of the Cetacean Big Daddy into the transcendently enlightened Millennium.

Well, you pays yer money and you takes yer choice. For some readers, namely those who can bring themselves to believe in such a pantheistic apotheosis essentially outside the laws of physics or moral realism, or who desperately want to, this will satisfy. For others, it vitiates what has otherwise been a successful piece of transcendental science fiction for most of the story.

Where did Grimwood go wrong, assuming you are one of those who, like myself, would contend that he *did* go wrong?

In retrospect, perhaps from even before the very beginning, for there is a certain vaguely vibratory New Age tone to the Acknowledgment, a whiff of treacly spiritualism as opposed to a clear cool visionary spirituality, a sense that Grimwood in some sense *believes* in his Cetacean millenarianism, that this is a book with a Mission.

What is wrong with that, you may well ask?

Nothing *need* be wrong with it, and indeed one need not even share the mystic belief system informing a work of fiction in order to enjoy it. I am no Catholic, but I find Anthony Boucher's *The Quest for Saint Aquin* a great science fiction story. I am no Mormon, but Orson Scott Card's *The Folk of the Fringe* succeeds for me on a literary science fictional level.

But these tales and others like them succeed not only as fiction but in making the disbelieving readers question, if only for the duration, their disbelief, precisely because they do *not* violate the laws of the material realm or the literary rules of plausibility in order to bring forth their transcendental message but demonstrate how the spiritual, the transcendent, the numinous, may be found *in the very reality the readers would seem to be inhabiting*.

Thus, I would contend that despite the supernatural elements that abound in fantasy, despite the efficacy of magic, despite the evocation of gods, goddesses, heroes, heroines, images out of the collective species unconscious, *science*

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fiction is inherently a more puissant mode for the meaningful exploration of the things of the spirit, for it is science fiction that is the literary instrument more ready, willing, and able to realistically relate altered consciousness, transcendent mystical states, satori, enlightenment, grace, sense of wonder, to the psychological and intellectual realities experienced by its readers.

Which is not at all to say that fantasy cannot serve as such an instrument too. Indeed it too is capable of reaching a curiously similar vision about the relationship between the supernatural and the true things of the spirit, between the material realm and the human heart. Though it usually takes rather unconventional fantasy to get there.

Take two novels by Nancy Springer, a writer whose early reputation was made with a pretty conventional brand of fantasy. *Larque on the Wing*, and *Metal Angel* were published within months of each other, so I have no idea which was written first. But taken together, they certainly mark a sudden quantum leap both forward and sideways for this well-established writer.

Larque on the Wing is a blend of a kind of peculiarly North American slapstick Magic Realism and the contemporary feminist novel of identity and gender, the former not usually noted for its focus on characterological depth nor the latter for its sense of humor.

But *Larque on the Wing* deals with inherently dark and deep material, with an unerringly blithe-spirited touch, without making light of the serious psychic and spiritual discombobulation of Springer's comic but well-rounded heroine-cum-hero, Larque Haroo-tunian.

Larque, as the novel opens, is a middle-aged wife and mother with a more or less economically successful career turning out forthrightly kitschy paintings. She also has the fantastic ability (or better curse) of uncontrollably spinning off immaterial "doppelgängers" of herself and other people, animals even, sort of snapshots of their (and her) instantaneous karmic states manifested as temporary ectoplasmic ghosts.

Her mother has a different sort of fantastic ability, of which she is entirely unaware; that of maintaining the perfect and perfectly awful "niceness" of her environment and those who impinge upon it simply by blinking and making it and them so.

And then there is Shadow, the Eternal Gay Cowboy and Argent, the perfect and ever youthful lover he shapes for himself. They come to inhabit Popular Street, a fantasy gay wonderland accessible only by a kind of talismanic magic, and emblematic of freedom and the life fantastic; a sort of Christopher Street of the Spirit, a Greenwich Village of the heart, and perhaps the dominant image of the novel.

One day, Larque produces a dop-

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pelgänger of her childhood self, Sky, the self that had wanted to be a *real* artist, or, better, a cowboy. Sky does not dissolve. Instead she alternately haunts and flees from Larque, from what her adult self has become. Larque, pursuing Sky, the idealism she has lost, a stronger self-image, eventually finds herself (in several senses) on Popular Street, where she meets Shadow and Argent, and is transformed into Lark, a handsome, strong, young, gay man.

What we have here is certainly fantasy, but a far cry from the conventional genre sort, in which the game is to create a kind of alternate mimetic reality, in which magic works, or vampires are real, or wizards contend for mastery of an otherwise realistically rendered material world.

Larque on the Wing is somewhat akin to *Ancestral Hungers,* fantasy that *knows* it's fantasy, but unlike Scott Baker, Nancy Springer herein allows the message to entirely shape the medium, makes no attempt to render the phenomenological surface of the skein of fantastic events mimetically.

Far from it.

Larque on the Wing is Magic Realism.

Magic:

The events and logic of the story, the transformations that the characters go through, the literary reality and the laws thereof themselves, follow entirely imagistic imperatives, reflect not some alternative universe of conventional fantasy, but the externalization of the inner lives and metamorphoses thereof that Springer seeks to portray.

Realism:

On the level of those inner lives, identity crises, and transformations, despite the consistently humorous tone, despite the free style mutations of the external surround, Larque, and to a lesser extent the other characters, are psychologically and spiritually real people going through deeply felt crises of identity, allegiance, and gender, all too familiar to real readers in the so-called real world.

And just as Larque herself ultimately achieves a kind of true maturity that integrates the spirit of her childhood doppelgänger, her male and female principles, so, hopefully, *Larque on the Wing* may be an example of what genre fantasy, shorn of its simplistic attempts at mimesis and informed by a more sophisticated vision of its own true nature, may yet become.

Metal Angel, on the other hand, is something no less interesting, but quite different—almost, you might say, a mirror image.

Volos, a discorporate angel tired of endlessly singing God's praises in the Hosannah Chorus, incarnates himself on a rooftop in Los Angeles as a charismatically beautiful winged man, scores himself a Harley, and embarks upon a meteoric career as a heavy metal rock star.

Sounds like a set-up for a comic

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novel? Sounds akin to *Towing Jehovah*, in which a single unequivocal fantasy element is dropped down into the material world to generate satiric fun and games? It certainly *could* have been.

But it isn't.

Instead, Springer plays it all quite realistically, including not only the character of Volos, but this angel's complex psychological, metaphysical, and yes, sexual reasons for descending from the immaterial realm of Heaven in pursuit of the nitty-gritty transcendentalism to be found roaring bare-chested down the highway on a Hog in pursuit of the Spirit of Rock and Roll.

Metal Angel is exactly what the title proclaims it to be, the story of an angel who descends from Heaven to taste the incarnate joys of the flesh, of how he finds friends, allies, lovers, a manager, joins a band, fronts it to an apotheosis of stardom, is opposed by the forces of uptight righteousness, and achieves a kind of sacrificial martyrdom-cum-personal-salvation at the end.

Minus the central fantasy element, Nancy Springer has written a rather classic realistic rock novel here, and an excellent one. The music, the biz, the people in it, life on the road, the highs, the hubristic temptations, the concerts, the groupies, the internal dynamics of a more or less ordinary band fronted by a star catapulting them to the top, it's all here, grittily rendered, and it rocks and it rolls. The story of Volos could as well be a fictionalized retelling of the legend of Elvis or Jim Morrison, of the rise and fall of the Rock Star, the Promethean icon of our age.

Except that Volos *is* an angel. And while *Metal Angel* burns with Nancy Springer's passion for the music, for the glorious anarchic Hog-riding Spirit of Rock and Roll, there's something else at work here too.

Springer doesn't simply drop a fantasy figure of an angel into the world of rock and roll; she's done something truly rare and strange, something somehow science fictional. She's created a psychologically and spiritually *realistic* angel, a soul in torment.

Phenomenologically, Heaven as seen via Volos is pretty much as the traditional Christian format would have it, choruses of disembodied spirits spending eternity literally singing the praises of an omnipotent and omniscient God.

What then, would it *really* be like to be one of these celestial sessions spirits, taking as a given that this set-up is literally true?

Thus, on a deeper level, *Metal Angel* becomes a complex meditation on the tensions between traditional religious dogma and the soul's personal quest for ecstatic transcendence on its own unique terms, between *being* good and *feeling* good, between surrender to the Will of God, and surrender to one's own nature, between the Word and the Music, between mores and libido, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, between the eternal

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communal harmony of subsumation in the Celestial Chorus and the anarchic liberty of Rock and Roll.

Springer does not exactly resolve these tensions. How can she, since they are in a certain sense the central spiritual conundrum of the age?

Conventional social wisdom and theological imperative as expressed in millennia of the collective tutelary myths of the species demand that the audience be denied what its secret heart desires; that Prometheus be chained to the rock, that Lucifer be cast into the pit, that Jesus be nailed to the cross, that Faust be damned, that Michael Valentine Smith be slain, that Elvis OD, that Jim Morrison die young in Paris, that Volos be deprived of his winged heavy metal glory, that Tootle the Train must not be allowed to remain in the fields sniffing the flowers at the end of the tale but must be forced back onto the straight and narrow of the tracks.

So while Springer allows her fallen angel a certain human level of salvation at the end, he must pay the usual price; she is not quite ready to follow the imperatives of her tale and the passion with which she has told it *that* far beyond the social pale. She cannot quite openly state in words what one feels her music has been proclaiming all along.

Namely that the true flowering of the soul is not to be found in abnegatory subsumation of the song of the self in some theologically correct collective Heavenly Chorus in the great by and by, but right here in the glories of the material realm barreling down the highway bare-chested on a Hog at one with the Spirit of Rock and Roll. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writers name and address. Letters can be E-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Note the North American SF Con(vention) (NASFiC) in July. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folk songs, and info on clubs & fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JUNE 1995

22-25—**SF Research Assn.** For info, write: **1402 4th Ave. N., Grand Forks ND 58203.** Or phone **(701) 775-5038** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Grand Forks ND (if city omitted, same as in address) at the UND Student Union. Guests will include: none announced.

23-25—**ConTretemps. (402) 397-7807.** Omaha NE. Bentley, Murray, Hevelin, Ewell, Logan, McKee.

29-July 2—**Chicago ComiCon. (312) 274-1832.** Convention Center, Rosemont, IL. Strictly comics.

30-July 2—**InConJunction. (317) 839-5519.** Adam's Mark, Indianapolis IN. McIntyre, A. Andrews.

30-July 3—**WesterCon. (503) 283-0802.** Red Lion Jantzen Beach, Portland, OR. V. Vinge, E. Pelz.

JULY 1995

1-2—**SF Days NRW. (49-234) 461-390.** Düsseldorf Germany. Theme: religion. Membership DM 35.00.

7-9—**Archon, Box 50125, Clayton MO 63105. (314) 421-2860.** Gateway, Collinsville IL (nr. St. Louis).

7-9—**LibertyCon, Box 695, Hixson TN 37343. (615) 894-0440.** Days Inn, Chattanooga TN. Tucker.

7-9—**Vi-Khan, 2926 Valarie Cir., Colorado Springs CO 80917. (719) 597-5259.** Holiday Inn N. Connie Willis.

7-9—**ConJuration, Box 692024, Tulsa OK 74169.** Adam's Mark. Ed Bryant. G. Cook, D. L. Anderson.

7-9—**A Distant Shore, Box 9287, Anaheim CA 92812.** Doubletree LAX. Beauty & the Beast TV show.

13-16—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 925-2813.** Hilton. Ellison, Weis. The NASFiC.

13-16—**Magnum Opus Con, Box 6585, Athens GA 30604. (707) 549-1533.** Callaway Gdn., Pine Mt. Ga.

13-16—**Origins, Box 3100, Kent OH 44240. (800) 529-3976.** Conv. Center, Philadelphia PA. Gaming.

14-16—**Rebellion, Box 1766, Bellaire TX 77402.** Houston TX. Danny John-Jules, Leslie Fish. Media.

14-16—**StoogeCon, % Reighter, 10220 Calera Rd., Philadelphia PA 19114.** For Three Stooges fans.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003. (301) 345-5106.** Glasgow UK. WorldCon. $125.

AUGUST 1996

29-Sep. 2—**LACon III, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Hilton, Anaheim CA. The WorldCon for '96.

AUGUST 1997

28-Sep 1—**LoneStarCon 2, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755.** Marriotts. The 1997 WorldCon. $80 now.

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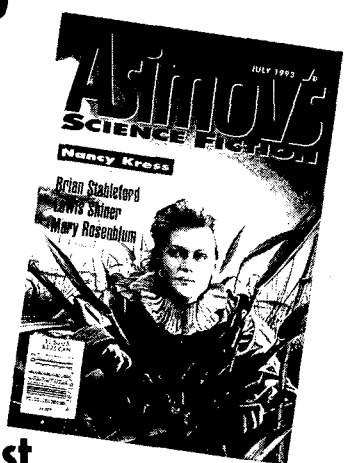

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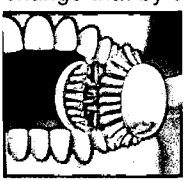

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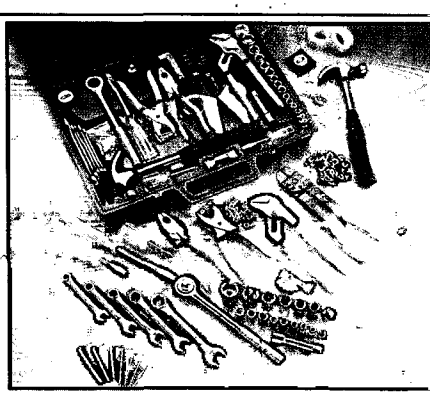

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